

MEN, MEMORY, AND MEMORIAL: VIETNAM VETERAN THEATRICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of Vietnam War veteran narratives and how they are presented on stage. I argue that these plays are a form of commemoration of the Vietnam War and those who fought in it. I examine three plays: *Medal of Honor Rag* (1976) by Tom Cole, *Still Life* (1982) by Emily Mann, and *Tracers* (1983) by John DiFusco, et al. There are hundreds of plays and musicals written directly about the war. Through a dramaturgical methodology I combine textual analysis, production research, interviews with two of the three playwrights, academic scholarship on the plays, my own staged reading of *Still Life* in February 2015, and select oral/written histories from Vietnam veterans to illustrate how the plays function as commemorative-storytelling of the veteran experience. Each chapter is a dramaturgical case study that could be used for production. The plays each have a wide range of topics, motifs, and themes, many of which I address, including the overlapping themes of wounding (moments of injury and psychological repercussions), coming home (surviving the war and returning home), and commemorating (via medals and memorials).

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Introduction

We make war in much the same way that we make policy, make cities, make works of art, make love, and make believe.

—Milton Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*

This dissertation is a study of Vietnam War veteran narratives and how they are presented on stage. At the most simple level the purpose of this dissertation is two-fold: 1) to create in-depth dramaturgical case studies for each play and 2) to argue how the plays and the veterans contribute to the archive and the repertoire of the Vietnam War. I demonstrate how veteran narratives are both driven by and help to shape the American perception of Vietnam War veterans' identities.¹ Through a dramaturgical methodology I combine textual analysis, production research, interviews with two of the three playwrights, academic scholarship on the plays, my own staged reading of *Still Life* in February 2015, and selected oral/written histories from Vietnam War veterans to illustrate how the plays function as commemorative-storytelling of the veteran experience. Special consideration is given to the discussion and performances that display post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The PTSD of the portrayed characters comes through most clearly in the moments of wounding (the time of injury and their repercussions), coming home, and commemorating (via medals and memorials). In this way, the plays utilized here are a performative representation of Vietnam War-specific PTSD and the plays serve as a means of commemorating the war, the veterans, and the veterans' PTSD.

I examine three plays: *Medal of Honor Rag* (1976) by Tom Cole, *Still Life* (1982) by Emily Mann, and *Tracers* (1983) by John DiFusco, et al. There are

¹ For this project, I focus my lens on the American perspective of the Vietnam War in

hundreds of plays and musicals written directly about the war. These include Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970), Wesley H. Balk's *The Dramatization of 365 Days* (1972), Megan Terry's *Viet Rock: A Folk War Movie* (1996), Steven Dietz's *Last of the Boys* (2008), and perhaps most famously David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* (1971), *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971), *The Orphan* (1972), and *Streamers* (1976).² There are almost as many that indirectly address the war such as Bertolt Brecht's *Antigone* as performed by The Living Theatre in 1990 and Barbara Garson's *MacBird!* (1967). There are hundreds of plays and musicals portraying United States veterans from numerous other wars as well. In Philip D. Beidler's (Professor of American Literature at the University of Alabama) *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982) he notes that the best writings about the Vietnam War all have something in common,

A feel for the way an experience actually seizes upon us, seizes all at once as a thing of the senses, of the emotions, of the intellect, of the spirit—and on the other a distinct awareness of engagement in a primary process of sense-making, of discovering the peculiar ways in which the experience of war can now be made to signify within the larger evolution of culture as a whole.³

The plays I examine for this project are three representative plays about the Vietnam War that share their own commonalities. One area of overlap is that each play addresses, directly or indirectly, veteran PTSD especially in the moments of wounding, coming home, and commemorating. In speaking with veterans and reading their stories, each of these moments—wounding, coming home, and commemorating—become talking-points as they are often connected to one

² There are hundreds of plays that look at the Vietnam War; this is just a small sampling.

³ Beidler, Philip D. *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982, xiii.

another. After being wounded a Vietnam War soldier was often sent home and given some form of medal, such as the Purple Heart, to commemorate their sacrifice. This is not the only path of a veteran, but one that is noted in these plays.

The most basic experience of war is enough to cause any veteran to return from war with various forms of PTSD. PTSD manifests itself in a variety of ways. There are several varying symptoms of PTSD—including lack of control over mental functions (including memory and the ability to trust), a feeling of constant danger and threat, activation of combat skills in post-war life, alcohol and drug use—any of which can lead to depression and feelings of isolation and meaninglessness.⁴ All of these symptoms are mentioned throughout the three plays. Surviving the trauma of war is, in itself, a trigger for PTSD. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist, worked with a group of American combat veterans of the Vietnam War, specifically those suffering from severe and chronic PTSD. In his book, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994), Shay examines the similarities between the experience of Vietnam War veterans and Homer's account of Achilles in the *Iliad*. He explains that the *Iliad* can teach us something about combat soldiers and, inversely, that combat soldiers can teach us something about the *Iliad*: a better understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder. Shay suggests, "Unhealed war trauma can leave men as speechless as victims of prolonged political torture."⁵ *Medal of Honor Rag*, *Still Life*, and *Tracers* give a voice to speechless veterans of the Vietnam War.

⁴ Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Scribner, 1994, xx.

⁵ Shay, xxii.

In addition, each play is connected to, based on, or inspired by actual veterans of the war. There is a certain level of credibility that comes with writing about the war from a first or second-person perspective. Toby Zinman, professor at University of the Arts, notes in her article “Search and Destroy: The Drama of the Vietnam War,” (1990) that there are distinct differences between Vietnam War plays that are written by veterans and those that are written by civilians. She argues the differences are most clearly found in credentials (being a veteran) and in content (the story). The decision to write about yourself or allow yourself to be written about, Beidler posits, is a risky endeavor. The risk is “being swept up into a self-contained universe of discourse where everything from official euphemism to battlefield slang seems the product of some insane genius for making reality and unreality—and thus, by implication, sense and nonsense—as indistinguishable as possible.”⁶ Cole, Mann, and DiFusco believed it was worth the risk to tell these stories and each of them blurs the line between reality and unreality in their own way.

Medal of Honor Rag is loosely based on Vietnam War veteran, Dwight Johnson, but set in a semi-fictional scenario. Johnson or “Dale Jackson” aka “D.J.” (in the play) was a United States Army soldier who received the Congressional Medal of Honor (the highest military honor) for his service during the Vietnam War (1968) and he returned home to Valley Forge Army Hospital because of his mental state. Johnson/Jackson died after being shot numerous times while participating in an armed robbery of a grocery store (1971). *Still Life* is a documentary play based on

⁶ Beidler, 5.

three people Mann interviewed in 1978—[Mark] (Vietnam veteran), [Cheryl] (his wife), and [Nadine] (his lover)—and she uses their words to tell the story.⁷ This play highlights, most of all, a Vietnam War veteran's experience of coming home: how those around him are affected and his adaptability (or not) to returning home. Mark has two women in his life that view him from two distinct perspectives, but both see the trauma that he endured in Vietnam. *Tracers* is a collection of interrelated scenes and stories written by eight Vietnam veterans; some fictional, some truthful. Their stories show the similarities and differences between the individual experiences of war. *Tracers* was not only written by veterans, but also performed by veterans. Vietnam War veterans have written many plays about the war and their experiences, most famously, those written by David Rabe. I selected to examine plays that were written by non-veterans (civilians), yet connected to actual veterans, with the exception of *Tracers*, as a means to hear and see the stories of war through the lens of those not directly involved in battle. I chose to include *Tracers* as it stands alone in the genre of Vietnam War plays written by veterans for several reasons. It is not the only play written by Vietnam veterans, but it is the only one, according to my research, that was written *and* performed collaboratively by eight Vietnam War veterans. Neither is necessarily unique—a play written by veterans or a play performed by veterans—the combination of the two, the popularity of the

⁷ As their real names are not provided, I will indicate that I am speaking about the real person by using brackets around their names. When no brackets are present, that is meant to indicate that I am referencing the character in the play. While the dialogue is made up of their words, I still believe it is important to make a distinction between the person and the character.

play, and means of examining their own participation in the war allow for *Tracers* to stand apart from other plays.

Another way *Tracers* stands out from other plays is the setting. Very few Vietnam War plays take place in country, which is a distinct contrast from the films that examine the war. *Tracers* is the only play of the three examined here that has numerous scenes set in Vietnam. A chapter written by Don Ringnalda, Professor Emeritus, in Philip Jason's edited collection of essays, *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* (1991) is entitled "Doing It Wrong Is Getting It Right: America's Vietnam War Drama." In this article, Ringnalda acknowledges that setting a story about the war outside of the war is an attempt to remove "'carnalization' from carnage."⁸ The chapter continues,

[T]here are some seldomly [sic] heard voices out there that are taking the bloody glamour out of war. Perhaps this explains why they are so infrequently heard and critically discussed. They are the voices that do Vietnam all wrong. These error-prone "mimes" are the Vietnam War playwrights—Tom Cole, Terrence McNally, Stephen Metcalfe, John DiFusco, and of special importance Emily Mann, David Rabe, and Amlin Gray.⁹

Ringnalda suggests the only way to write about the war is to get it wrong, but the wrongness, the inability to write about it expertly, is what is right about Vietnam War narratives.

The overwhelming choice to set stories outside of Vietnam points to the weight of the war, at least as how it is presented on stage, being placed on the individuals who fought versus the fighting itself. It also puts aside the "horror" of actual battle. "Horror" remains a prevalent part the Vietnam War narrative as told

⁸ Jason, Philip K. Ed. *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991, 72.

⁹ Jason, 72.

through fictional stories, but it is rarely acknowledged or mentioned in the plays that examine the war. Arguably the most famous reference to the horror comes from Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's (played by Marlon Brando) dying words "The horror, the horror" in *Apocalypse Now*.¹⁰ But the term is used once in *Medal of Honor Rag* when Doctor says to D.J., "After surviving a hell of [sic] death and horror, which by all odds should have left you dead yourself."¹¹ The term is also used by J.W. Fenn in *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolution in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era* (1992) to discuss the "psychological horror" that people who write about the war must face.¹² He explains that the Vietnam War plays, which "attempted to portray the magnitude of the event and its immediate and long-lasting effects on both the individual and the collective American psyche, best illustrate how the theatre eventually managed to come to terms with the devastating experience of the conflict."¹³ *Medal of Honor Rag* and *Still Life* take place after the veteran returns home, while *Tracers* is set in Vietnam and back at home. Through my research of these three plays, I hope to reinforce the individual experience of the veteran in war and post-war as well as the collective experience of veterans as it applies to the communication of the war. This project does not aim to validate or invalidate any specific experiences, but to show when and how those experiences converge and diverge.

¹⁰ *Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, and Sam Bottoms. Hollywood: United Artists, 1979.

¹¹ Cole, Tom. *Medal of Honor Rag*. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1977, 34.

¹² Fenn, J.W. *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992, 12.

¹³ Fenn, 12.

Throughout, I may refer to veterans as “the veteran” or “the Vietnam War veteran,” but this is not an attempt to lump all veterans or all Vietnam War veterans into a monolithic “VETERAN.” Instead it is my way of addressing the collective, while never devaluing the individual veteran experience. In turn, these narratives helped to shape how the country responded to the war in Vietnam and to its veterans. Theatre, and specifically these plays, has a way of discussing the war and showing the war in unique format. Theatre teases out elements of the war experience that history cannot always demonstrate effectively: the pain and anger that was felt by the country during and after the war in Vietnam. There is much written about the concept of a collective identity and many texts that discuss “the veteran.” In some ways the Vietnam War veteran is mythic. Beidler explains that the memory of the war creates “new contexts of collective vision.”¹⁴ And that “the experience of Vietnam would have to become ours both in its very uniqueness and also in the ways that it could ultimately be made, in the dimension of myths past, present, and future, to touch on some sense of our imaginative, and even our spiritual, commonality of people.”¹⁵ Despite the myths that surround the war and its veterans, the reality remains that 58,000+ United States men and women are dead or missing due to this war. Philip Jason, Professor Emeritus, notes,

The battle among scholars and politicians who have tried to explain this war is a battle for our collective memory—for the “truth” that future generations will share about the reasons for, conduct of, and outcome of this conflict. Our novelists, playwrights, and poets are significant players in this engagement—few, if any, are above a political or moral vision and many works are overtly propagandistic.¹⁶

¹⁴ Beidler, xiv.

¹⁵ Beidler, xiv.

¹⁶ Jason, xii.

The veterans, and those who write for and about the veteran, play a vital role in our understanding of the significance of the war in Vietnam, but that understanding will never fully encompass the individual or collective experience.

My personal connection to the topic comes from my father, David Boyle, a Vietnam War veteran. He was a 2nd Lieutenant of the 3rd Platoon Charlie Company, 6th Battalion of the 31st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division.¹⁷ His particular platoon performed ambush patrols, Eagle flights, artillery fire support for base protection, bridge protection, and search and destroy missions.¹⁸ Boyle entered the service in February 1967, arrived in Vietnam in December 1968, was wounded in January 1969, and completed his service in June 1970. For his service, he received a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star (for heroism) with a “V” device for valor, which he also has tattooed on his arm near one of his scars.¹⁹ His story, like these plays, is representative of the Vietnam War veteran experience as an individual and part of the collective of veterans. I do not directly include my father’s experience and stories in this project, but instead I sought out pre-existing oral and written narratives from Vietnam War veterans. Due to the extreme nature of war, veterans are often shaped by their military experiences and therefore their perspective of the world is tied to those experiences.

The inclusion of oral and written histories is not often presented in Vietnam War television shows or films. There are almost as many films about the Vietnam

¹⁷ See Figure 1 and

¹⁸ Eagle flights are a large air assault of helicopters.

¹⁹ See Figure 3.

War as there are plays, but film, as a mass medium, has reached farther than plays have been able to. Among the most well-known films, and perhaps most well-liked, are *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Only two of these popular films, *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home*, aim their cameras on the veteran. Most representations of the war in film (and television) take place *in* war, not after. Both *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* take place during the war and after. Although there are exceptions, the soldier is frequently highlighted while the veteran is silenced, as a character quality or as a narrative device. Professor of Film and Media Arts at Temple University, Nora Alter wrote *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (1996), which looks at theatre that served as protest theatre while the war was taking place. She utilizes protest theatre to tease out causes of the war and the theatrical response to it. Alter is “concerned with the way theatre responded to television—and not, say, to film, its main competition at the time for the title of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.”²⁰ Though audiences often look to film as an “accurate” representation of the war, Alter challenges this notion. Within her argument she asserts, “Above all, running through all the plays, there is a deeply ambivalent response (sometimes reactive, sometimes creative) to the filmic mediatization of the first ‘television war’—on TV primarily but in other media as well, including the fast-emerging computer technologies.”²¹ It is difficult and perhaps insufficient to discuss cultural representations of the war without examining television and film. Therefore

²⁰ Alter, Nora M. *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, xii-xiii. *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a German term often translated as a work of total art.

²¹ Alter, xi-xii.

I reference them as a touchstone if needed throughout this dissertation, while focusing my research and attention on Vietnam War plays. Whereas these films remain important cultural representations of the war, the plays I examine function in a different way than the films, allowing for a less sensational, and often more truthful, narration of the veteran story (stories).

As I have noted, part of my argument is that the plays themselves function as a form of commemoration of the war and those who fought it. Throughout the last eighteen months I have visited and analyzed memorials and various commemorations of the Vietnam War. In Washington, D.C., I visited the Vietnam War Memorial Wall, the Newseum, which had a special exhibition entitled, “Reporting Vietnam,” the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, which includes an exhibition of 250 years of American Military Conflicts, as well as a handful of memorials in Indiana, Kentucky, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas.²² These sites contribute to and create what Marita Sturken, scholar and author, calls “cultural memory.” Sturken was not the first to use this term or apply this theory, but she was among the first to apply it directly to the Vietnam War in her book *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997). Sturken asks what it means for a culture to remember? How is the Vietnam War remembered? Sturken’s work demonstrates how cultural memory and history are entangled rather than oppositional. Through utilizing Sturken’s cultural memory and theorist, Diana Taylor’s concept of the archive and the repertoire I seek to answer many questions including but not limited to: How do the

²² See Figure 4.

narratives shape the identity and perception of Vietnam veterans? And what do these plays tell us about their identity and perception? Largely, I ask why we, as a Nation, narrate the Vietnam War and how we narrate the Vietnam War veteran and his/her experience. We narrate to create order, to make meaning, to commemorate, to recollect, to solidify memory, and to establish identity.

Professor and Vietnam War Veteran, Adrian Lewis argues, in his book *The American Culture of War* (2012), “culture influences the way nations fight.”²³ Therefore, as a society, we must understand *why* we fight in order to understand the *way* we fight and vice-versa. The Vietnam War was a unique war for the United States in many ways. One element of its uniqueness was in the “contradiction between the realities of war and the imagined, futuristic technological vision of war sold to the American people by the US Government.”²⁴ As the government and the military struggled to justify our presence in Vietnam to the American people, the country began to push back, to question the draft and the war. Lewis presents an argument that previous wars including World War I and World War II were “total wars,” meaning the United States was all-in. The country gave everything and everyone they could to the war effort.²⁵ But the Vietnam War was a “limited war,” without the full weight, money, energy, and support of the citizens of the United States. Lewis explains, “Political and military leaders accepted and fought limited wars, but the American people and many of the soldiers who fought never accepted

²³ Lewis, Adrian R. *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2012, 1.

²⁴ Lewis, 3.

²⁵ Lewis, 2-3.

the doctrine or strategy of limited war.”²⁶ Without the support of the people, the government struggled explain our presence in Vietnam, especially due to the twenty year-length of the war.

The American people suffered alongside those who fought. The experience and trauma, though different, existed in both soldiers and society. Alter writes that for “many Americans, it was a profoundly disturbing war, consciously *and* unconsciously, neither glorious nor necessary.”²⁷ With the loss of the war, the myth that the United States and the military are “unbeatable” was striped away. Why wouldn’t the country question what took place in Vietnam? And why wouldn’t the country feel traumatized by it? As the scholar and Vice Chancellor at the University of Washington, Susan Jeffords argues, “Vietnam representation is punctuated by questions of confusion: the indefinability of the ‘enemy’; the vague goals of American involvement in Vietnam; the taking, relinquishing, and then retaking of the same village or hill; the indeterminacy of responsibility for actions; the status of fact and fiction; the reliability of subjectivity.”²⁸ The United States needed time to grieve the war and as a country we, arguably, went through the stages of grief that is often associated with the loss of a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Beidler argues,

Getting a handle on the experience once it was over, then, was not just a question of “readjustment” of the sort imaged in the story [...] Rather it was a problem of “vision” in its largest sense—of having undergone an experience to peculiar unto itself and its own insane dynamic as to make nothing in life ever look altogether sane again—subsequently (and here would be their real point of difference from other veterans of other American wars), of being

²⁶ Lewis, 3.

²⁷ Alter, 3.

²⁸ Jeffords, 50.

sentenced, by unspoken national consent, to solitary confinement with the memory of it, urged to tell no tales, please, on the grounds that even were the experience of Vietnam to prove susceptible eventually to certain methods of explanation, there would be virtually no one in the entire country who would care to hear about it.²⁹

It was not until President Ronald Reagan was elected and took the steps to truly welcome home Vietnam War veterans that the country made its way into acceptance and then memorialization with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. being completed in 1982.

The Vietnam War has been conceptualized in popular culture as a war of firsts: the first war the United States lost; the first “televised war”; the first, and perhaps only, “uncensored war.”³⁰ American civilians were able to sit at home and see the war through the media, specifically through television and film. Alter points out the “images of Vietnam, brought into ‘the living room’ (and bars and bedrooms, etc.), were not only removed from the reality of the viewer’s social context; they also referred to a context that was unknown to the viewer and could neither be checked nor verified reliably with other people.”³¹ Those images or motifs in the public knowledge must be taken into account because, as Alter notes, “It was over *that* image that public opinion about the war was waged in the United States, both for and against it.”³² As the war raged on news reports continued, plays were written, and movies were filmed in an attempt to understand and communicate the war in Vietnam. Writers such as Michael Herr never liked the war being described as a

²⁹ Beidler, 9.

³⁰ See Figure 5.

³¹ Alter, xv.

³² Alter, xiii.

“television war.” Herr said, “I always believed it was a writer’s war.”³³ Even after the war ended, and still today, the media—plays, novels, news, magazines, photographs, radio, television, film, etc.—grappled with the Vietnam War. I believe we, as a culture, must continue to examine “lessons learned” in Vietnam and we must also interrogate the mediatization and presentation of the war and its impact on our perception of it.

Just as classical Greek dramas often responded to past wars, Vietnam War plays can and do respond to current and ongoing military conflicts. Author and journalist Myra MacPherson writes in her book, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (1984),

Vietnam was the most divisive time of battle in our country since the Civil War. It was the third most pivotal experience in this century—following the Depression and World War II. Its consequences are still being felt in our foreign policy, our troubled economy, in a haunted generation, in the new generation faced with possible new Vietnams, in our hearts and minds. And yet because we lost many refuse to face its monumental importance.³⁴

So much of where the U.S. is today, in regards to policies, military conflicts, and more, are a direct reaction to what happened in Vietnam. The “support our troops” bumper stickers and Gulf War yellow ribbons were the nation’s attempt to compensate for how Vietnam War veterans were treated. In 1973, the draft ended. Even before the U.S. left Vietnam, they called for the end of conscription. What Lewis refers to as a “primary element of citizenship” was severed; as a country, we would not longer force our young men and women to go to war. Lewis notes, “*With the*

³³ Schroeder, Eric James. *Vietnam, We’ve All Been There: Interviews with American Writers*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1992, 38.

³⁴ MacPherson, Myra. *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984, 5.

*demise of the citizen-soldier Army, one of the principal institutions of the modern nation-state no longer existed.”*³⁵ He continues,

The United States Army deployed to Vietnam was the best trained, best equipped army of any deployed to war in the twentieth century. It was the first fully integrated US Army deployed to the war since the American Revolution. It was a traditional American citizen-soldier Army, the last to be deployed by the United States in the twentieth century.³⁶

In some ways, the ending of the draft shifted the perspective of those who serve because they now fully choose to serve instead of being called upon by the U.S. government. This also changed the way the military and veterans are discussed in theatre.

New plays that look at war, such as Quiara Alegría Hudes’s Elliot trilogy, hold the veteran in high esteem and speak of the veteran as a suffering hero while Vietnam War plays look at the veteran as just suffering. The nation has constructed a narrative that categorizes veterans: good, bad, and forgotten. World War I and II veterans are “good.” Vietnam War veterans are “bad” or “forgotten.” And Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are “good,” but also mentally broken and traumatized. The lines should not and cannot be so finely drawn. As my research continues on the United States military, the Vietnam War, and Vietnam War veterans, I see how *present* the war remains and in turn, how it is important to continue to analyze the war and those who fought in it. I have had the opportunity to present papers on the war at conferences where the conversation surrounding the Vietnam War differentiated from other wars—World War I, World War II, and the current military conflicts—but it is still present. The war remains culturally relevant in the

³⁵ Lewis, 4. Emphasize his, not mine.

³⁶ Lewis, 261.

memories of those who served, those who lived through it, second-generation survivors like myself, and in cultural memory of the country. The Vietnam War remains a part of the conversation around film and media, photography, protests, current military involvements, the resulting uprisings in Ferguson, how race and sexuality is discussed within the military, and much more. Films, novels, and plays continue to be written about the Vietnam War experience and the nation still grapples with the cultural memory of the war.

Throughout the past several years, new films and plays about the war have been written and produced. In 2014, two more films about the war have been released: *In Country* and *Last Days in Vietnam*. *In Country* is a documentary film that examines Vietnam War re-enactors in Oregon. The film “blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, past and present to tell a story about men trying to access the past.”³⁷ *Last Days in Vietnam* is a documentary film, which covers the last days in Vietnam as the North Vietnamese army began to close in on Saigon and the struggle to evacuate South Vietnamese citizens and United States military personnel.³⁸ I saw *Last Days in Vietnam* in December 2014 and it has since been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. In 2008, Dean B. Kaner and Eric Small teamed up with Barry Brodsky—a Vietnam Veteran and writer—to write *The Boys of Winter*, which remains unpublished to date, but has had several readings and small productions. This play first began when Kaner and

³⁷ “*In Country: A Documentary Film* by Mike Attie and Megan O’Hara.” 2014. <http://incountryfilm.com/wordpress/about/>

³⁸ “*Last Days in Vietnam: Directed and Produced by Rory Kennedy for American Experience Films/PBS.*” 2014. <http://www.lastdaysinvietnam.com/>

Small created a screenplay, and then a play. After little success, they went on the hunt for someone who could add a more authentic voice to the project. *The Boys of Winter* is about three high school seniors, in 1966, who have a decision to make: college or Vietnam. The Narrator, who is also one of the high school boys and a disgruntled veteran, tells the story. Elaine Romero wrote *A Work of Art* (2012) in memory of Sergeant Travis Mark Arndt in Iraq and Captain Thomas Lee Carter in Vietnam. The play was commissioned by the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, and tells the story of Kirk, a Mexican-American who served in Vietnam and went MIA (missing in action). These are just a few examples of how the war remains prevalent in the arts.

I mention these works to 1) show how the Vietnam War and its veterans remain present in our national culture and 2) preface what I hope to contribute to the field with this project. I am able to show how the war and its veterans have continued relevance in the conversations at conferences and in new works of film and theatre, the scholarship—new scholarship—is lacking. It will not be too long in the future when we, as a nation, will view the remaining survivors of the Vietnam War as we do those of World War II as touchstones to a past moment in history and as people whose lives, stories, and experiences need to be recorded and valued. In this investigation I aim to provide a means for future analysis of war and theatre through the lens of the veterans who lived through war and the stories told on stage about war. Through bringing together dramatic representations of the war, the veterans, and the narratives, this project fills a gap in the scholarship regarding

Vietnam War plays and contributes to the commemoration of those who served, survived, or sacrificed.

My three case studies, *Medal of Honor Rag*, *Still Life*, and *Tracers*, are three fairly well-known Vietnam War plays. Despite their semi-popularity, they are rarely performed and there is little scholarship that examines these three titles. Many of the studies (monographs, dissertations, articles, etc.) of Vietnam War plays focus on other case studies such as the David Rabe plays, Vietnam War protest plays, or an encyclopedic approach to the plays. There are a handful (less than ten) dissertations/thesis' that I have located, each taking a unique approach to how the war is presented on stage (as well as in film and literature). Only one of the studies specifically examines the role of the Vietnam veteran in such works. This author, Terry Carl Wunder, wrote a brief (sixty-nine pages) master's thesis, entitled "The Reality of It All: A Comparison of Plays about Veterans with Real Life Experience" (1989), which investigates similar works to those I am employing including *Medal of Honor Rag*, *Still Life*, and *Strange Snow* (1983) by Stephen Metcalfe. Wunder's work differs from mine in various ways including his focus on the black veteran in *Medal of Honor Rag* and the women in *Still Life*. While these are both topics that I discuss my focus is on the portrayal and narrative of the Vietnam War veteran. Unlike Wunder, I do not aim to validate or invalidate the representations of the Vietnam War veteran, but instead to study how these narratives are created and what impact they have on the identity of the veteran.

These three plays are also challenging texts, dramaturgically speaking. They require a multi-pronged, intersectional approach in regards to the research

required and textual analysis. I examine and analyze the texts to support my assertions of my positive view of the structure and dramatic storytelling. If the plays themselves are strong quality pieces of theatre literature, then what is it about the content (the war, the veterans) that makes them less desirable for production? What makes World War I and World War II plays—which are performed more often—more palatable and producible? It is said that war is a reflection of culture and society. It is *also* said that theatre is (or at least can be) a reflection of culture and society. An examination of the two, side-by-side, may allow for similarities, differences, or revelations of something new to emerge. As a dramaturg, I come to the texts not to see how they can, should, or could be performed, but to provide a deeper understanding of the play and the people they represent.

I utilize what I am calling a “dramaturgical methodology,” which includes tools such as textual analysis, production research, archival research, secondary ethnographic work, and the study of commemorations (memorials and medals). Dramaturgy as an art form has evolved greatly over the past several hundred years as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) is often noted as the “first” dramaturg, though it can be (and has been) argued that dramaturgical work has always been an inherent element of storytelling. As long as dramaturgy has been an acknowledged and accepted form of artistry, it has been debated. What does it mean? Who does it? My definition of dramaturgy is built on the works of dramaturgs including Felicia Londré, Geoff Proehl, Mark Bly and influential texts such as Elinor Fuchs’ “E.F.’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play.” In combining and building on Fuchs’ small planet and Proehl’s landscape and journey (explained below), I view

my role as a dramaturgical tour guide. I define dramaturgy, in its most simple form, as an exploration of a play (or text). I explore the play, the history, the storytelling, the structure, and the context and I ask questions of it. The questions are many and they vary from play to play, but often include: what are the rules of the world in this play? What do I need to learn to understand the world? What stories are told in this world? I do my best to answer each question that I ask. Once I have the answer or a variety of answers, I guide the director, actors, and production team on a tour of my understanding of the world of the play. In this way, I view the dramaturg as an interdisciplinarian who is able to move from teacher to researcher to storyteller to investigator to reporter to historian and more in order to guide others through the text and to present my interpretation of it.

Scholar and dramaturg, Geoff Proehl introduces the terms “landscape” and “journey” in his book *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (2014). Proehl employs these vocabularies to talk about production dramaturgy in terms of conversation, pleasure, and pattern as part of the collaboration in-production process (landscape) and as a literal case study to engage, explore, and respond (journey). The dramaturgical case studies of *Medal of Honor Rag*, *Still Life*, and *Tracers* that I lay out here, rely more on the journey than the landscape. Since I am not involved with productions of these plays, I cannot participate in the same kind of conversations that Proehl does. My approach is more of a dramaturgical exercise to see what can be found in these plays and the history of them. Proehl proposes that the “attempt to know the dramaturgy of a play is little different from

the attempt to know another person for whom we care deeply.”³⁹ In this regard, I care deeply for the plays, the stories and themes present in them and for the plays’ placement in history. I come to the plays to find what they have offered and what they still have to offer to the theatre. Therefore this method hovers somewhere in-between the standard theatre history research, the field of performance studies, and dramaturgical research.

As a methodology, dramaturgy is inherently interdisciplinary. This method allows for an in-depth examination of a story structure, interpretations, symbolism, and historical context that provides a new or different way of understanding. Dramaturgy as a method of investigation pulls from a variety of methods and combines them into one. Dramaturgy functions as the intersection of life (history, experiences, relationships, etc.) and theatre (putting history, experiences, relationships, etc. on stage). An additional element, which I found to be vitally important in my personal dramaturgical process, is an emotional connection to the topic. For this particular project, my emotional connection comes through my father as a Vietnam War veteran. What I mean by “emotional connection” is a passion for the topic, story, themes, or characters—connecting with piece beyond a scholarly duty. This is not an entirely unique element for dramaturgs, but for me, it has allowed a more detailed and personal connection for the research and analysis. The passion I found for this topic (as well as other dramaturgical projects I have worked on during the past production calendar) has helped to fuel my tour guide approach

³⁹ Proehl, Geoffrey S, (and DD Kugler, Mark Lamos, and Michael Lupu). *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008, 9.

to these plays and my study of the Vietnam War. As the veterans of the Vietnam War get older it is important that we, as a nation, listen to, preserve, and re-tell the stories of those who fought and those who were wounded. War does not end with a declaration of peace. It remains in the bodies of those who fought, in the memories of those who died, and in the cultural memory of the nation. Oral histories of veterans and narratives presented on stage contribute to the archive and the repertoire of the United States involvement in the Vietnam War.

Most of the dramaturg's work is tethered to the needs of the production and the directorial approach. This dissertation and the case studies are not connected to production, therefore I do not attempt to match the work of Mark Bly and his *Production Notebooks* (1996 and 2001), but the case study structure is similar.⁴⁰ My preparations for production dramaturgy begin with reading the text, formulating questions, and speaking to the director. In conversation with the director, I ask about his/her approach, what he/she wants to communicate with the story, and how he/she hopes to employ my services during the pre-rehearsal and rehearsal process. Once the director has indicated the needs of my research and skills, I then move forward with those requests in mind. The director is absent in this project, but many of the dramaturgical elements I would use in production remain present.

In my academic and professional dramaturgical experiences, I create a packet of information to be utilized by the director, actors, and designers.⁴¹ The "packet" is

⁴⁰ Bly, Mark. Ed. *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Progress*. Volume I. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1996. Bly, Mark. Ed. *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Progress*. Volume II. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2001.

⁴¹ See Dramaturgical Packets: Table of Contents in the appendix for examples.

a standard term used to describe the materials provided and is often a literal packet (pages of research, presented as a booklet), but there are a variety of ways to communicate the research with the team. Other variations can include, but are not limited to, digital formats (website, video, PowerPoint, etc.), full texts (books, journals, etc.), research “walls” (hanging images and texts in the rehearsal space), and more. With changing technologies, dramaturgs are able to experiment with these formats. The majority of the productions for which I have been a dramaturg have requested the paper packet version. The packet includes the following sections: playwright (biography, background, information about additional plays written by the playwright), playwright inspiration, background about the play (development information, previous productions, reviews, production images), historical context (timeline, setting, maps), general research (quotes from articles and books, images), and glossary of terms and references (definitions, explanations, images). Past dramaturgical packets range from fifteen to sixty pages depending upon familiarity with the topics present in the play, complexity of historical research, number of references, and more. My packets do not often include textual analysis (at least not to the extent I present here). The in-depth textual analysis performed here, is reflective of the work that typically takes place in the rehearsal room or during individual conversations with the director. But the text work is vitally important to the argument I make about Vietnam War plays as memorial.

I utilize a variety of script analysis techniques to discuss the plays themselves and their historical and contextual location in history and theatre history. I break down each play through a number of themes and motifs that surfaced during my

analysis of the texts. In essence, the sections on each play could be pulled out and utilized as a starting point for a dramaturgical packet for production. If these chapters were to be used for production, it would require editing. I try to avoid providing actors with more than twenty-five pages unless absolutely necessary. The almost line-by-line analysis I have done here would be removed almost entirely from the packet and would be replaced with a brief discussion of themes and motifs present in the play. I believe the background information of the playwright and the history of the play are extremely important for the understanding of the play, but I would condense those sections as well. Regardless of the content provided in the packet, I still do the in-depth analysis and research of the play in order to prepare for the rehearsal process. That way I am also ready and available to answer questions that may arise in the rehearsal process. In addition, I would include more images and graphics to express ideas within in the play. While the packet is meant to assist and guide the production team (including the director, actors, and designers), it is not meant to dictate a director's style or approach, acting techniques, or design choices. Most theatres can (and should be able to) rely on the design team to conduct their own individual research, but I have addressed particular design moments, suggestions, and necessities when I found them to be important to the dramaturgical understanding of the play. The information is most useful for the director and actors that would be involved in a production of any of these plays through a deeper understanding of theory, context, and textual analysis. This is combined with my focus on representations of the Vietnam War veteran on stage, which I add through written and oral histories of the veteran and through

memorials and medals. I examine how the archive and repertoire, via Taylor, are significant to communicating the experience and culture of humans (specifically in war) through an investigation of archiving Vietnam War veterans.

This dissertation does not look nor read (arguably) like a typical dissertation. The result of this method—a dramaturgical methodology combined with oral and written history—is not an attempt to thread a sustained argument through each section. As my mentor and prolific dramaturg, Felicia Londré, wrote in *Words at Play: Creative Writing and Dramaturgy* (2005), “Not everyone recognizes the dramaturgical essay [or dramaturgical work, in general] as an art form, but I am confident that it is.”⁴² As a dramaturg, I present my art to the production team and the audience through evidence from the text and deep dives into themes, motifs, concepts, histories, and terms found in the text. Londré also writes that the product dramaturgs create (whether it is a program note, packet, or knowledge/context) is a “never-ending struggle to master a technique in a given medium for the achievement of some heightened expression that is both controlled and inspired.”⁴³ The introduction and conclusion of each chapter is where I will pull the threads of my argument together and make the connections between each play. With each play, I examine how the playwright presents wounding, coming home, and commemorating. I also draw on additional motifs found in the texts. It is also full, perhaps overly so, with quotations from the text and from my sources. Part of the task of a dramaturg is to share other people’s words and pull from them what I can

⁴² Londré, Felicia Hardison. *Words at Play: Creative Writing and Dramaturgy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005, 1.

⁴³ Londré, 2-3.

and I have attempted to do that here. With each play I dramaturg, I narrow in on a few elements that are vital to the understanding and retelling of the story. My approach to each individual play differs slightly and I will address those differences, as well as the similarities, at the top of each chapter.

Memorializing the War

In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997) Marita Sturken, highlights the common acceptance of the differences between cultural memory and history. She asks what it means for a culture to remember. Sturken examines “cultural memory’s role in producing concepts of the ‘nation’ and of an ‘American people’ and explores how individuals interact with cultural products.”⁴⁴ She presents the two, not as oppositional, but instead entangled.⁴⁵ The unstable nature or “changeability” of memories raises issues of “how the past can be verified, understood, and given meaning.”⁴⁶ Sturken comments on how memory shapes our lived experiences and that it affects everything as it “gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity.”⁴⁷ The production of cultural memory comes through in objects, images, and in general, representations, which Sturken calls “technologies of memory.”⁴⁸ Photographs, news reports, anecdotes, personal experiences, and relationships—all of these and more make up the spaces of overlap between

⁴⁴ Sturken, 1.

⁴⁵ Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

⁴⁶ Sturken, 2.

⁴⁷ Sturken, 1.

⁴⁸ Sturken, 9.

personal memory and cultural memory. How we, as humans, receive and process information dictates how and why we remember a specific moment and even an entire war. It is the tension between representations of memory and the experience of the actual event that become tangled in cultural memory.

This entanglement, and how it is portrayed, is what I examine in this project—how the war, memorials, personal memories, cultural memory, and cultural representations are entangled. For example, in Chapter 2 I look at Emily Mann's *Still Life*. Mann herself had a personal connection to the war as a college student and Vietnam War protestor. Her personal memory of her perspective of the war is inherently entangled with how she interviewed the three people that would become the characters of her play: what questions did she ask? How did she ask them? What parts of the interviews did she leave out and why? After writing *Still Life*, the play became more than the personal memory of Mann's and of the three people involved. It became part of the cultural memory of the war. Sturken contends that Vietnam disrupted the master narrative and the narrative of the war continues to be written by the entanglement of cultural memory and history. This highlights the opposition in the narrative: "the divisive effect of the war on American society and the marginalization of Vietnam veterans."⁴⁹ Sturken's work directly applies to the work I am doing here as she examines the Vietnam War and memorials, but also the impact of these on culture and cultural memory. Just as theatre allows audiences to search for understanding and meaning through interaction with the past, memorials stand as a physical and tangible memory of the past. As I mentioned

⁴⁹ Sturken, 45.

previously, over the past eighteen months I have visited numerous memorials, museums, and exhibits related to the Vietnam War. Some of which I sought out while others I stumbled across.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. is the most well-known and perhaps most accessible tangible memorial of the war. The National Park Service website describes the Wall as “The Wall That Heals,” which is “Honoring the men and women who served in the controversial Vietnam War.”⁵⁰ The Wall was designed by architect Maya Lin and was completed in 1982. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial lists the names (chronologically) of the 58,000+ Americans who lost their lives or were missing in action during the Vietnam War. I went to the Wall for the first time as a child on a family trip. It was not until my senior year of high school (2000) that I visited Washington, D.C. and the Wall again. At that time, I had more of an understanding of what the war was about and what my father’s involvement was in the war. In May 2015, The Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall came to Kansas City on the front lawn of National World War I Museum and Liberty Memorial.⁵¹ The traveling wall is a 3/5 scale to the memorial in Washington, D.C. and it travels all over the country so that we can be reminded of the war and those who were killed or missing.⁵² All over the grounds there were different things to see (including a helicopter), people to talk to, local veterans, and local veteran organizations.⁵³ In July 2015, I spent almost two weeks in Washington, D.C. visiting museums,

⁵⁰ “Vietnam Veterans: Memorial.” *National Park Service*. 01 January 2015.
<http://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm>

⁵¹ See Figure 6.

⁵² See Figure 7.

⁵³ See Figure 8.

memorials, and working on new plays at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. I was anxious to see the Wall again. I took hundreds of pictures and spent over an hour walking, looking at the Wall, and watching others examine the Wall.⁵⁴ Visitors can see themselves in the reflection of the Wall, an intentional and significant part of Lin's design in order to bring the past closer to the present.⁵⁵

From May 23, 2015 through September 12, 2016 the Newseum in Washington, D.C. has an exhibit entitled "Reporting Vietnam." As author and journalist, James Reston, Jr. notes in his introduction of *Coming to Terms: American Plays and the Vietnam War* (1985), "Vietnam is not yet, by any measure, a digested event of American history. It is a national experience that is still denied and repressed, not one which is folded into the sweep of our history and which we calmly acknowledge as the downside of American potentiality."⁵⁶ This denial and repression is directly combated through exhibits such as "Reporting Vietnam." This exhibit marks the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War while also noting its continued presence and focuses on its representation in the media as the first televised war. The exhibit concentrates on how "journalists brought news about the war to a divided nation."⁵⁷ One quote from the "Reporting Vietnam" says, "The drumbeat of news about Vietnam over the course of a decade was a constant reminder of the mounting loss of American lives."⁵⁸ This exhibit utilizes photos, news footage, music, artifacts (including gear, helmets, cameras, etc.), newspapers,

⁵⁴ See Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11.

⁵⁵ See Figure 12.

⁵⁶ Reston, Jr., viii.

⁵⁷ "Reporting Vietnam." *Newseum*. 23 July 2015. (website)
<http://www.newseum.org/exhibits/current/reporting-vietnam/>

⁵⁸ Author's photo from "Reporting Vietnam" exhibit.

and magazines. In addition to being called the “first televised war” another catch phrase used is the “living room war,” meaning that the nation watched this war from their couches. The description of the “living room war” at the Newseum notes that “network news contained far less graphic violence than many people remember,” which indicates the censoring and selection that took place in the editing room.⁵⁹ Most of the coverage focused on U.S. advancement, stories about individual soldiers, and military technology. Due to the censorship, which took place at all levels of leadership within news organizations, journalists, military, and the government back at home, tension arose between the military and the media. One Newseum quote says, “Reporters who broke ranks to reveal the ‘credibility gap’ between government rhetoric and the battlefield reality often fought editors at home who downplayed negative stories.”⁶⁰ Despite availability of images and information or censorship of it, the question remains: would the nation have been interested in the truth? Of course, the reality of the war did make its way home, but how would the country have responded if the war was even more transparent? Gary Fisher Dawson who is a past theatre practitioner and scholar, concludes, in *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, “American documentary theatre is an alternative to received journalism.”⁶¹ Exhibits like “Reporting Vietnam” function as a knowledge transfer, another archival method, and even a memorial.

⁵⁹ Author’s photo from “Reporting Vietnam” exhibit. See Figure 23.

⁶⁰ Author’s photo from “Reporting Vietnam” exhibit.

⁶¹ Dawson, Gary Fisher. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, xi.

Vietnam War memorials serve as reminders, which is, in part, why they are scattered across the country. There are several in Kansas, two that I stumbled upon unexpectedly. In fall 2015, I attended a friend's art show in the RG Endres Gallery in Prairie Village, Kansas. When I left the building I saw a small bronze statue of a pair of boots with a rifle and helmet.⁶² A few months later while walking around Antioch Park in Merriam, KS, I came across another Vietnam War memorial.⁶³ There are many more across the state including those in Winfield, Junction City, Manhattan, and even one on campus at the University of Kansas.

Archiving the War

I visited the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.⁶⁴ The Vietnam Center and Archive (VNCA) "collects and preserves the documentary record of the Vietnam War, and supports and encourages research and education regarding all aspects of the American Vietnam Experience."⁶⁵ The center and archive was established in 1989 with direct involvement from the Vietnam veteran community. The functions of the center are threefold,

[S]upport for the Vietnam Archive and collection and preservation of pertinent historical source material; promotion of education through exhibits, classroom instruction, education programs, and publications; and encouragement of related scholarship through organizing and hosting conferences and symposia, academic, educational, and cultural exchanges and the publishing of scholarly research.⁶⁶

⁶² See Figure 13.

⁶³ See Figure 14.

⁶⁴ See Figure 15.

⁶⁵ "The Virtual Center and Archive." *Texas Tech University*. 2000.

<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

⁶⁶ "The Virtual Center and Archive."

The VNCA continues to grow as they continually receive materials including the Douglas Pike Collection in 1994.⁶⁷ During my visit, I was given a tour of the archive and was able to take pictures and ask questions.⁶⁸ I scheduled my trip to Lubbock not knowing that General Anthony Zinni, retired United States Marine Corps General and Vietnam War veteran, would be giving a lecture the night I was in town on November 13, 2015.⁶⁹ His lecture centered on the idea that we, as a nation, have put the Vietnam War behind us and we have never taken a hard look back. Zinni said, “We were innocent when we got there. We miscalculated the enemy and we were going to learn some hard lessons.”⁷⁰ He argued his point that the history of the war should be important to us all because “it is part of who we have become.”⁷¹ Therefore it remains vital to archive the war and the experiences of the veterans.

The VNCA has two branches: the physical archive and the Virtual Vietnam Archive (VVA). The VVA contains over four million pages of scanned materials, which include: documents, photographs, artifacts, film, recorded sound, maps, oral histories and more. Some of the online materials are available for download, while others are strictly available for online viewing. The VVA is also a fluid archive in that new items are added daily. As a result, the content continues to grow and shift based on newly found and donated materials. The permutable nature of this archive allows for the space between Taylor’s archive and repertoire to be filled as information and

⁶⁷ Douglas Pike was a Vietnam War scholar who also served as a Foreign Service Officer in Asia.

⁶⁸ See Figure 16.

⁶⁹ See Figure 17.

⁷⁰ Zinni, General Anthony. Lecture at The Vietnam Center and Archive as part of the Guest Lecture Series. Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, Nov. 15, 2015.

⁷¹ Zinni.

images can be added at any time and by anyone. Much of the collection comes from military veterans, but the VVA is striving to increase collections from all perspectives and interactions with the war meaning the VVA asks for anyone that had any experience with the war, civilian or otherwise, to contribute.⁷² Often archives only contain information and material from individuals or an event being preserved, but the VNCA and VVA have recognized and responded to the cultural impact of the Vietnam War and, in turn, have invited anyone who lived through that time to contribute. It is significant to note that most of the archive is built on personal items. While it does house official documentation and information, those pieces are generally included in governmental and national archives. The inclusion of personal artifacts and narratives is another means by which the VNCA and VVA contribute to space between the archive and the repertoire. Other materials—maps, government documents, etc.—exist in the vast quantity of books (“official” or otherwise) written on the war in Vietnam. By capturing the veteran experience, the archive and repertoire create an “afterlife”—after-war-life—collection that contributes to the present and future human experience, but yet it can never fully encapsulate those lived experiences during the Vietnam War.

It is necessary to briefly explain the problematic quality of the VVA, or any online archive. Just as earthquakes, sinkholes, fires and other disastrous events can occur and disappear a building, home, etc. that contains an archive, digital archives are equally unstable. Digital archives are also susceptible to crashes, viruses, hacks, and more. As culture shifts and technology advances ways of collection, the archive

⁷² “The Virtual Vietnam Archive.”

(physically and digitally) potentially becomes more stable. Regardless of stability, the question of what is and what is not contributed to the archive still remains and that is part of the gap that the VVA attempts to fill, at least in regards to the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam Center and Archive and Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech include the Oral History Project. The Oral History Project holds oral and written histories of Vietnam veterans. Scholar and theorist, Rebecca Schneider articulates that “oral histories are constituted anew, recorded and ‘saved’ through technology in the name of identity and materiality.”⁷³ This is the goal of the Oral History Project, to record and save the stories of Vietnam veterans in order to transmit some of the repertoire into the archive. But Schneider also notes that oral histories are always “reconstructive, always incomplete” and they are only made up of what the speaker remembers and chooses to tell.⁷⁴ I worked with my father to add his story to the collection, which he completed in fall 2015 after speaking with Kelly E. Crager, Head of the Oral History Project, for over seven hours.⁷⁵ This also shows how some veterans are willing and ready to tell their stories and perhaps all we need to do is ask. If we can say to veterans, “Your story matters to the world. Share it with us,” I think we would be surprised with the response. The wounds of my father and of other Vietnam veterans transmit knowledge and also allow for survivors’ voices and bodies to be seen, heard, and read as part of the repertoire and archive of

⁷³ Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 101.

⁷⁴ Schneider, 100.

⁷⁵ The average length of each recorded interview ranges from one to three hours.

the war in Vietnam. Veterans of the Vietnam War are still here. Some day they will not be and we must acknowledge that while it is happening.

The medals, badges, and patches become an important tangible part of the Vietnam War and Vietnam veteran archive. United States military medals (badges and patches) are given for various reasons ranging from heroism to general involvement to being wounded and more. The most well-known medals include the Medal of Honor, the Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star. The Medal of Honor is the highest military honor, which is awarded for personal acts of valor that goes above and beyond the call of duty. To date, the Medal of Honor has been awarded to over 3000 men and women. It is this medal that is highlighted in *Medal of Honor Rag*. The Purple Heart is given to those who are wounded or killed in action. There are stories told, like those in *Still Life*, that question the validity of Purple Heart and those who receive it. The Bronze Star is awarded for acts of heroism, or other significant achievements. When this medal is given for acts of heroism, the medal can be worn with the “V” Device for Valor. When and how these honors are discussed within the text of the plays and the oral and written histories of veterans is a significant part of my research and discussion. This connects not only the characters to actual veterans, but also to the concept and acts of commemoration.

One major theorist whose work I rely on is Diana Taylor and her theory surrounding the “archive and repertoire” from *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003). Taylor notes that the archive is capable of containing the “grisly record of criminal violence.”⁷⁶ This includes

⁷⁶ Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the*

documents, maps, books, bones, films, photographs, medical records, etc.—the remains that indicate the violence that occurred. These objects are “supposedly resistant to change.”⁷⁷ The repertoire “enacts embodied memory” including performances, gestures, spoken words, movements, and, “all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”⁷⁸ These contain the “tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations” and as I posit, the physical and mental wounds.⁷⁹

Taylor’s theories investigate the transmission of knowledge—cultural knowledge, memory, and identity. She focuses on how the archive benefits those cultures that possess a means by which to capture memory and history, whether through written language, photographs, etc. Taylor writes, “Archival memory works across distance, over time and space, investigators can go back to reexamine an ancient manuscript, letters find their addresses through time and place, and computer discs at times cough up lost files with the right software.”⁸⁰ The archive succeeds in transmitting knowledge in these ways. The archive allows for us to examine history through tangible materials; the repertoire requires a presence to participate in knowledge transmission. Taylor argues that each—the archive and the repertoire—exceed “the limitations of the other.”⁸¹ Taylor utilizes these tools as a means for communicating the stories and experiences of oppressed communities,

Americas. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 192.

⁷⁷ Taylor, 19.

⁷⁸ Taylor, 20.

⁷⁹ Taylor, 193.

⁸⁰ Taylor, 19.

⁸¹ Taylor, 21.

non-literate or semi-literate societies, and “silenced” people. She views these communications, and discusses them as scenarios, as opposed to text or narrative.⁸²

Taylor’s work on the archive and the repertoire become useful and perhaps necessary tools in communicating the veteran experience, specifically the experience of the Vietnam War veteran.⁸³ I hope to extend the applications of Taylor’s theories. The Vietnam War veteran would not be considered part of a silenced community, but there is something silent about their service and experience as the veterans of the Vietnam War are unique among United States veterans of war. There is a separation between the way these veterans were, and are, treated. The veterans are not oppressed in the way that Taylor discusses or the way the Vietnamese were treated during the war, but many of those who fought were draftees, not volunteers. Taylor applies a performance studies lens in order to enhance this work and bridge “the schism not only between literary and oral traditions, but between verbal and nonverbal embodied cultural practice.”⁸⁴ This project focuses on the Vietnam War veteran, but I would also argue that it is applicable to all veterans of war. The plays exist as part of the archive of Vietnam War theatre, but they also examine the veteran’s experience (the repertoire). Through an application of Taylor’s theory, the veteran is simultaneously the archive and repertoire. They have their lived experiences, memories, and scars that represent the repertoire. But they also have their military records, photographs,

⁸² Taylor, 28.

⁸³ Taylor.

⁸⁴ Taylor, 36.

uniforms, and medals that exist in physical archives. When a veteran dies, part of both the archive and the repertoire go with him/her.

Framing: Approaching the War from History and Performance

There are hundreds of texts that discuss, argue, analyze, and question war. And almost as many books that grapple with memory and performance. Each new source provides a new way of thinking and writing about the war in Vietnam and how we remember and memorialize it. A few of the most influential texts for the way I write about war, memory, and performance include Rebecca Schneider's *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), especially her examination of Civil War reenactments. Schneider also writes about archive and argues it "became a mode of governance *against* memory. [...] Dissimulating and disappearing."⁸⁵ By taking objects and placing them into archives, we are no longer forced to remember. We can go to the Smithsonian, walk around, look, read, and then leave and forget. The archive, while preserving, it is also transforming access.

In *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (2000), professor and theorist Freddie Rokem examines the French Revolution and World War II in order to show how theatre that performs history "can become such an image, connecting the past with the present through the creativity of the theatre, constantly 'quoting' from the past, but erasing the exact traces in order to gain full meaning in the present."⁸⁶ Rokem argues that by

⁸⁵ Schneider, 100.

⁸⁶ Rokem, Freddie. *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000, xiii.

“performing history” we are able to approach the separation from the past, which allows us to see history again while theatre functions as a means for historical understanding. This book analyzes strategies the theatre uses “through which events and figures from these particular pasts (which in different ways are situated in the heart of the national consciousness of these places) have been ‘resurrected’ in the *here* and the *now* of theatrical performances.”⁸⁷ Theatre can be used as a tool to reexamine the past and that is what Cole, Mann, and DiFusco’s plays do. It is through these performances that audiences become witnesses, which also speaks to the question of reception, not only for the audience but also for the actors. Rokem describes how actors can serve as “hyper-historians” from which we, as audiences, can view and examine the past, especially when the plays are so closely tied to specific people and places in history.⁸⁸ Rokem asks if we do not utilize the past for present purposes and understanding, what function do historians employ? Through these re-examinations and re-presentations we are able to acknowledge history’s failures as well as confront them. Rokem describes performances of past events as serving as a “second telling” of the past. In this way, the plays presented here are literally a second telling of the real veterans they are connected to and a second telling in terms of Rokem’s argument.

If art is an imitation or a reflection of life then theatre functions as a means of response to life. Theatre has always been utilized as a tool to grapple with an issue facing an individual, a society, the world, an idea, or a question. Theatre looks at the past, present, and future as means for understanding our world. Theatre’s most

⁸⁷ Rokem, 2.

⁸⁸ Rokem, 13.

direct form of response is often found in documentary theatre. Like much of theatre history, documentary theatre has a long past of telling stories that come from pre-existing documents. One of the main qualities of documentary theatre is the utilization of primary sources (i.e. reports, newspapers, interviews, etc.).

Documentary theatre is often used as a tool for social or political change; at a minimum it is a response, but it can also be used a call to action. A more potent version of documentary theatre is verbatim theatre, which differs slightly as it uses the actual words of individuals; taking the words of someone and using the words to thematically or structurally tell a story. Emily Mann's *Still Life* is verbatim theatre; she took the words of [Mark], [Cheryl], and [Nadine] and put them into the play. While "verbatim" theatre is the most accurate term to describe Mann's play, she personally prefers the term "theatre of testimony" or "testimonial plays."⁸⁹ This complicates the genre as testimonial theatre is another form of documentary theatre. Alison Forsyth, lecturer at Aberystwyth University in Wales, *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Testimonial Plays* (2014) describes testimonial theatre as something that can and does take us,

[F]urther away from easily digestible and discrete factual narratives, and instead brings us closer to an understanding of the complicated and even irreconcilable truths of a past event, and indeed it could even be a form which makes us interrogate the way we consign, oftentimes prematurely, historical events to "the past" when in fact that past may be still shaping our present, and potentially our future.⁹⁰

Testimonial theatre relies on the experiences and memories of the playwright(s) to create a narrative. The terms documentary, verbatim, and testimonial are often used

⁸⁹ Dawson, xiv.

⁹⁰ Forsyth, 2.

interchangeably. For this project, I utilize “documentary theatre” as an umbrella term to include all three forms. I will use the individual terms as necessary throughout. This genre is especially useful when creating theatre about the Vietnam War as we “unseeing altogether too much of Vietnam in the clear, reassuring light of narrative artifice.”⁹¹ Cole, Mann, and DiFusco present the horror, trauma, and reality of the Vietnam War, while at the same time allowing us to approach it through the lens of theatre.

Medal of Honor Rag by Tom Cole

In the wake of recent events such as the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, films like *Selma*, and the May 11, 2015 cover of *Time* (which is of a young black man running in the streets followed by rows of armed police officers), we cannot help but to be reminded of the 1960s in the United States. Two major battles were fought in the 1960s: the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.⁹² The calendar dates have changes, but the stakes and questions remain the same. Who are we? What are we fighting for? Jay David and Elaine Crane argue in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* (1971),

For two hundred years the black soldier has fought for his own personal freedom as well as for his country. It is no longer a question of proving ability; the black soldier has proved his heroism. Today the issues are acceptance as a human being and an American citizen and being granted the dignity and the privileges those identities imply.⁹³

⁹¹ Jason, 68.

⁹² “*Time* Back Issues Store.”

⁹³ David, Jay and Elaine Crane. Eds. *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1971, 15.

Playwright, Tom Cole, wrote *Medal of Honor Rag* in 1976 in order to tell the story of Dwight Johnson, a (black) Vietnam War veteran from Detroit, Michigan.⁹⁴ The character of Dale Jackson (D.J.), is closely based on a real Vietnam War veteran and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Dwight Johnson. Cole creates a fictional representation of Dwight Johnson in Dale Jackson, but heavily draws on the history of Dwight Johnson and actual testimony from people who knew him.⁹⁵ There is very little known (or at least written) about Johnson's life before Vietnam. When researching Johnson, the story that is told again and again is the story of his medal—the Medal of Honor. Johnson was drafted in July 1966 to the United States Army, soon after he graduated from high school. In 1968, Johnson was sent to Vietnam. He left the war, and for a time the military, with the rank of Specialist Fifth Class, U.S. Army, Company B, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, 4th Infantry Division. He served his time and was sent home. *Medal of Honor Rag* is a fact-based telling of the story, but the one we hear from D.J. is also filled with emotion, pain, sacrifice, and guilt. The play is set at Valley Forge Army Hospital with only D.J., the Doctor, and Military Guard (who only appears briefly). The play's examination of the war and particularly of how this individual man survived speaks to current conflicts and the use of theatre to grapple with these topics as well as serving as an agent for social change. *Medal of Honor Rag* can speak to continuing race relations across the United States.

⁹⁴ Drafts of the play existed before 1976 and it was first performed in 1975, but 1976 is the publication date.

⁹⁵ Fenn, 212.

My textual analysis brings to the forefront numerous themes and issues that are addressed throughout the play. I explore the background of the play including Cole's life and Johnson's life. I also look at the initial production as well as several additional productions of the play, which include the reception of it by reviewers and audiences. I have divided the play into sections that address D.J.'s therapy and the general use of psychology in regards to the veteran, specifically how the Vietnam veteran is unique in terms of United States military veterans. Cole notes the differences of the treatment of veterans by comparing Vietnam War veterans with World War II veterans. Cole uses the treatment of World War II veterans as the "standard" and Vietnam veterans as the "other." Through this comparison Cole is able to show the anger and frustration in D.J.'s character. This anger leads D.J. to bring up wounded veterans, including mentally wounded veterans such as himself, and how the Veterans Administration (VA) responded to them. Much of the play has D.J. grappling with his mental state and one of D.J.'s tactics for dealing with this depression and grief was to not deal with it, to escape, to go A.W.O.L. (absent without leave). D.J. suffers from survival's guilt that is directly connected to coming home safely and receiving the Medal of Honor, which is entirely based on Johnson's reception of his medal. Guilt is a significant element of trauma that many soldiers have battled after returning from war. The play walks us through D.J.'s guilt and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Medal of Honor Rag* ends with D.J.'s (and Johnson's death) told via direct address from Doc. This play is as much about D.J.'s war experiences as it is about his reintegration into society. The play grapples with

countless issues that veterans, especially Vietnam veterans, struggle with. D.J.'s race plays a major role throughout these varied topics.

Still Life by Emily Mann

Emily Mann is currently in her 25th season as the Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre, a professional theatre company on the campus of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. But long before she held such a prestigious position in the professional theatre community, she wrote one of the most powerful documentary plays, which responds to the Vietnam War, *Still Life*. I interviewed Mann on June 1, 2015 to discuss the war and her play. She said that the play found her. She had just finished writing *Annulla* and was not sure if she was prepared to write another tragedy about another war, but she was drawn to the real women that she was going to write about in *Still Life*. In the summer of 1978, Mann met with the people, who in the play are named [Mark] (a Marine), [Cheryl] (Mark's wife), and [Nadine] (Mark's lover), for over nine months and recorded over 140 hours of conversation. The dialogue is made up of the people's own words as Mann recorded and transcribed them. Once she started, Mann felt a sense of obligation to them and to their stories. It is the telling of the stories, of their stories, of her (Mann's) story, and the stories of the veterans that gives weight to this time in history.

Once Mann was committed to telling their stories she recognized the importance of what she was creating. The war was done and over and she wanted people to talk about it. She wanted people to realize what had happened and what we, as a country, had done. Mann would not and could not accept the silence that came after the war. It was also a personal project as her father and her had so often

disagreed about the war; she wanted to show her father [Mark's] story. Mann directed the premiere production of *Still Life* at the Goodman Studio Theater in Chicago during the fall of 1980. This documentary play approaches the war in Vietnam in unique ways: 1) the conversations took place four years after the war ended; 2) Mann approached the story not only from the perspective of the veteran, but also the women in his life; 3) the various reactions to the veteran.

In addition to wounds, coming home, and commemoration, Mann's play also highlights the role masculinity plays in war. Many people have studied the tie between war and masculinity and *Still Life* puts that study on stage. It is also the only play of the three I investigate here that looks at the war through the eyes of women. [Mark's] PTSD is attached to his guilt for what he did in war and his fear of who he has become post-war. Both of those elements—guilt and fear—are reflected in Cheryl and Nadine. This also leads to Mark's aggressive sexual nature that is present throughout the play. One powerful piece of *Still Life* is the trauma Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine endured due to Mark's participation in the war. Mann's play is also the play that most directly presents the arguments I make about the veteran as an archive and repertoire. Mark has a grotesque way of memorializing the war in photos and artifacts. In this way, *Still Life* becomes an examination of violence as an overarching theme of [Mark's] life—violence in war and violence at home.

Tracers by John DiFusco, Vincent Caristi, Richard Chaves, Eric E. Emerson, Rick Gallavan, Merlin Marston, Harry Stephens, and Sheldon Lettich

The second chapter covers John DiFusco's *Tracers*. DiFusco receives most of the credit and acknowledgment for *Tracers* because it was his conception, but the play was actually a devised piece of theatre that was created by DiFusco with the

help of other actors, all of who are Vietnam veterans: Vincent Caristi, Richard Chaves, Eric E. Emerson, Rick Gallavan, Merlin Marston, Harry Stephens, and one writer, Sheldon Lettich. *Tracers* is an example of “testimonial theatre,” which is the term that is most often used to describe *Tracers* as it is based on the actors’/creators’ experiences. Theatre audiences often think of testimonial or documentary theatre as something that brings us closer to the experience and that is exactly what DiFusco wanted.

I had the opportunity to interview DiFusco on June 22, 2015. After we spoke we also connected on Facebook and through the use of social media and email, I have stayed in contact with him. He has been more than willing to share additional information with me and answered several additional questions. This connection on social media has also allowed me the opportunity to see how present *Tracers* remains as a major part of DiFusco’s life. DiFusco, as well as the other creators of *Tracers*, are all veterans; DiFusco went to Vietnam in 1967. One of the elements DiFusco wanted to impart to me was the difference between serving stateside and being in Vietnam during the war—the two are entirely different. He described Vietnam as “Rougher, edgier, so different.”⁹⁶ But fortunately, DiFusco returned home safely later in November 1968 and upon his return home he earned the United States Air Force Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service. A few years later he decided he wanted to tell his story and give others a chance to do the same. DiFusco wanted to highlight the ensemble quality of service, the lives of veterans, so he

⁹⁶ John DiFusco. Interview by Amanda Boyle, June 22, 2015. Telephone interview.

creation of *Tracers*. DiFusco compares the ensemble-devised piece to a Greek chorus. And the rituals present in the play support this notion.

From its inception, DiFusco had a hands-on approach to the play. He enjoys being a part of the play in every way and the opportunity to advise the director and meet with the actors. There were several themes that DiFusco wanted to address in the play. He emphasized the importance of death that is inevitable in war, specifically the killing of others and the strength or male bravado that is present throughout killing in Vietnam. He wanted to create an emotional response in the audience and on July 4, 1980 *Tracers* performed an in-progress production at the Odyssey Theatre in Los Angeles for invited guests only. That night the audience was invited to take in all that *Tracers* had to offer. In my textual analysis of *Tracers*, I begin with an examination of the bookends DiFusco created with the repetition of the language used in the prologue and the epilogue. This storytelling device frames the entire play between the repetition of the set of statements and questions written in the prologue and epilogue.

The play also addresses wounds, coming home, and commemoration, just as each of the three plays I examine here do. There are also elements that *Tracers* speaks to that the other plays do not including music, ritual, women, and military training. Music is a vital part of DiFusco's creation of *Tracers* and it is a necessary element in the storytelling. Unlike *Medal of Honor Rag*, which is set in a very specific time and place, *Tracers* tells its story through ambiguous time and place. This ambiguity affords DiFusco, et al. the ability to tell the story in a fluid way that highlights questions of mental illness and the uncertainty of time and place as well

as dreams. *Tracers* is a collection of memories, experiences, and fictional stories. DiFusco attempted to create a story that would speak to the variety of experiences of the Vietnam soldier and veteran. At the end of the play, the audience is often left with more questions than answers as it lacks a true conclusion. Perhaps this is DiFusco's way of commenting on the lack of understanding of the war in Vietnam.

Telling War Stories

To this day, many veterans feel an indescribable rage that they, for so long, seemed to be the only Americans who remembered the war's suffering and pain.

—Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*

Sturken reminds us that “memory and forgetting are co-constitutive processes; each is essential to other's existence.”⁹⁷ We would not fight to remember, if we did not forget. *Medal of Honor Rag* by Tom Cole, *Still Life* by Emily Mann, and *Tracers* by John DiFusco, et al. are three representative plays of Vietnam War literature written by American playwrights that force us to remember. The stories these playwrights have written allow audiences access the war from various veteran perspectives. The plays and the performances created numerous levels of archiving and commemorating Vietnam veterans. They allow for the archive and repertoire of the war, the veteran, and the country to be re-embodied and re-told time and time again. Alter suggests that theatre “offers a suitable visual medium to meet the sense of antiwar urgency and to adjust political statements to fluctuations of historical events and circumstances of reception.”⁹⁸ She continues to address the liveness of performance, which allows for alterations at each performance in order to respond

⁹⁷ Sturken, 2.

⁹⁸ Alter, 21.

to “not only criticism of performances but also to audience reaction even as the play is being performed.”⁹⁹ The embodiment of these stories gives Vietnam veterans a continued voice that should not be forgotten or set aside.

⁹⁹ Alter, 21.

Chapter 1: *Medal of Honor Rag* by Tom Cole

The tragedy is that many black youths do not feel
that America is worth fighting for to begin with.

—Jay David and Elaine Crane, *The Black Soldier:
From the American Revolution to Vietnam*

Each play I researched for this project is exceptional in many ways. And Tom Cole's *Medal of Honor Rag* is unique not only because it is a fictional story based on a real Vietnam War veteran, but also because it is the only play of the three that directly addresses race. It also makes a clear and consistent argument about the similarity and differences between Vietnam War U.S. veterans and other U.S. veterans, specifically World War II. The premise of the play is a story told in *almost* real time in Valley Forge Army Hospital. From the beginning, the play presents the psychological state of one veteran: Dwight Johnson. For my research and textual analysis of *Medal of Honor Rag*, I focused on wounding, coming home, and commemorating. With each new read-thru of the play, I found more and more topics and motifs present including ideas of therapy, psychological, reception of veterans, World War II, victory parades, the Veterans Administration, PTSD, guilt, and of course, the Medal of Honor. One area that I dedicated research time to was Dwight Johnson's life and comparing it to the fictional story told by Cole. I sought to highlight the differences and similarities between Dwight Johnson and D.J. Many of the descriptions of D.J., especially his often-mentioned "records" are pulled directly from Johnson's military documentation. Another unique part of the story presented in *Medal of Honor Rag* is how D.J. feels about having received the Medal of Honor. D.J. has a strong self-awareness of what the medal means to him and to the outside world. This chapter includes sections on Cole, Johnson, textual analysis (of the

themes I have mentioned here), and past productions and audience reception of *Medal of Honor Rag*.

Tom Cole: Playwright and Scholar

Tom Cole was born as Charles Thomas Cole on April 8, 1933. He grew up in Paterson, New Jersey. Cole's father, David Cole, was the son of Russian immigrants. Cole takes this aspect of his real life and inserts it into the Doctor character of *Medal of Honor Rag* (1976). Cole earned a bachelor's degree in American History and Literature from Harvard University in 1954. Soon after, he enlisted in the United States Army and was assigned to the Army Language School in Monterey, California to learn Russian. Cole was sent to Moscow in 1959 where he served as an interpreter for the American National Exhibition. After his service, he returned to the United States and to Harvard, where he received a master's degree in Slavic Languages and Literature. Following graduation he was hired to teach Russian and English Literature with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Cole's passion for literature and storytelling lead to his own work as an author, playwright, and screenwriter. The stories Cole wrote were often influenced by his life. His first book, *An End to Chivalry* (1965) directly pulled from his time in Moscow. Arguably, his most popular screenplay was *Smooth Talk* (1985), which was awarded praise from the Sundance Film Festival. *Smooth Talk* was a bit of a family affair as his wife, Joyce Chopra directed it. Much of his work is not popular by today's standards. His best-known creation is *Medal of Honor Rag*. In addition to *Medal of Honor Rag*, Cole wrote two more plays: *Fighting Bob* (1981) and *About Time* (1990).¹⁰⁰ Cole died on

¹⁰⁰ 1981 is the publication date, but it was first produced in 1979.

February 23, 2009 at the age of 75 from multiple myeloma. While this play is the story of Dwight Johnson, it is also the story of Tom Cole.

Dwight Johnson: A Black Veteran

The character of Dale Jackson (D.J.), is closely based on a real Vietnam veteran and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Dwight Johnson. Cole created a fictional representation of Dwight Johnson in Dale Jackson, but heavily draws on the history of Dwight Johnson and actual testimony from people who knew him.¹⁰¹ As one article states, “The story of Dwight Johnson and his drift from hero in Dakto, Vietnam, to villain in Detroit is a difficult one to trace.”¹⁰² I would argue that villain is a stretch, but we do see the many sides of Johnson through Cole’s lens. Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan on May 7, 1947. Johnson never knew his father (though he did have a stepfather, Brenton Alves, in his life for a short time), but was raised by his mother, Joyce Alves, along with his younger brother, David Alves. They grew up in the E.J. Jeffries Homes, a housing project in Detroit. The Jeffries Homes were originally developed in the 1940s to serve as low-cost housing for workers, specifically those working for the war, but they did not open until 1952. Very little is known (or at least written) about Johnson’s life before Vietnam. When researching Johnson, the story that is told again and again is the story of his medal. One exception is a profile in Allen Mikaelian’s (Instructor of History at American University) *Medal of Honor: Profiles of America’s Military Heroes from the Civil War to the Present* (2002), where Johnson is described as an “Explorer

¹⁰¹ Fenn, 212.

¹⁰² David, 229. This is most often written as “Dak To,” but occasionally seen as “Dakto” as it is here. Dak To was the site of a major battle during the Vietnam War in 1967, before Johnson was there.

Scout. Altar boy. Good grades, active in choir and drama. Extremely bright, with an army GT rating equivalent to an IQ of 120.”¹⁰³ Any pre-war stories told of Johnson are similar to this one; that he was a good boy, not a fighter, even gentle. This characterization allows us to see more of a backstory of Johnson, but how it impacted who he became is less clear except, perhaps, to highlight his entrance into the military.

Johnson was drafted in July 1966 to the United States Army, soon after graduating from high school and was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic training. There was never a good time to join the military during the years of the Vietnam War, but by 1966 the war was continually escalating. A year and a half later, Johnson found himself in Vietnam. Johnson’s rank was as Specialist Fifth Class, U.S. Army, Company B, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, 4th Infantry Division. He completed his duty and was sent home. When Johnson returned from the war, boys in the neighborhood teased him, telling him that he had “gotten off easy” since he avoided participation in the Tet Offensive.¹⁰⁴ Johnson made no attempt to contradict these accusations, but to say that anyone who served in Vietnam “got off easy” would be an inaccurate description. D.J. continually says that he did “nothing,” nothing happened.¹⁰⁵

“Nothing” was by no means how anyone else would describe Johnson’s service in

¹⁰³ Mikaelian, Allen. *Medal of Honor: Profiles of America’s Military Heroes from the Civil War to the Present*. New York: Hyperion, 2002, 241.

¹⁰⁴ The Tet Offensive (named after the lunar New Year, Tet) began on January 30, 1968 and went through March 28, 1968. In January, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched numerous coordinated attacks on South Vietnam. How the offensive was represented on U.S. television had a significant negative impact on how the country responded to the war. The news coverage highlighted the Battle of Hue and shocked the American public, which led to even greater antiwar sentiments.

¹⁰⁵ Mikaelian, 242.

Vietnam, but he uses it as a shield or possibly a technique of denial. There are two times in Johnson's life that caused him great attention: "30 minutes of 'uncommon valor' one cold morning in combat that earned him the nation's highest military decoration, and the 30-second confrontation in the Detroit grocery that ended his life."¹⁰⁶ The highest honor would be the Congressional Medal of Honor that Johnson earned for his actions near Dak To, Kontum Province in Vietnam on January 15, 1968. I will examine the incident that lead to earning the Medal of Honor, especially as it is told in *Medal of Honor Rag*. Any medal that is given has an official citation—story—of what happened and what qualifies that person for the medal. Some of them are simple, such as the Purple Heart, if someone is wounded in service they earn a Purple Heart, but the Medal of Honor is not as easily identified. The first Medal of Honor was given in 1861, but it was not until 1963 that Congress established set guidelines of how the Medal of Honor can be awarded. Those guidelines include military service against an enemy of the United States, an opposing foreign force, or an opposing armed force. Beyond those stipulations the medal is given for personal acts of valor that go above and beyond the call of duty. This is, of course, a gray area of what qualifies as "above and beyond." There were 259 recipients of the Medal of Honor for actions in the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁷ The official citation for Johnson's medal reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sp5c. [Specialist Fifth Class] Johnson, a tank driver with Company B, was a member of a reaction force moving to aid other elements of his platoon, which was in heavy contact with a battalion size North Vietnamese force. Sp5c. Johnson's tank, upon reaching the point of

¹⁰⁶ David, 230.

¹⁰⁷ "Archival Statistics."

contact, threw a track and became immobilized. Realizing that he could do no more as a driver, he climbed out of the vehicle, armed only with a .45 caliber pistol. Despite intense hostile fire, Sp5c. Johnson killed several enemy soldiers before he had expended his ammunition. Returning to his tank through a heavy volume of antitank rocket, small arms and automatic weapons fire, he obtained a submachinegun [sic] with which to continue his fight against the advancing enemy. Armed with this weapon, Sp5c. Johnson again braved deadly enemy fire to return to the center of the ambush site where he courageously eliminated more of the determined foe. Engaged in extremely close combat when the last of his ammunition was expended, he killed an enemy soldier with the stock end of his submachinegun. Now weaponless, Sp5c. Johnson ignored the enemy fire around him, climbed into his platoon sergeant's tank, extricated a wounded crewmember and carried him to an armored personnel carrier. He then returned to the same tank and assisted in firing the main gun until it jammed. In a magnificent display of courage, Sp5c. Johnson exited the tank and again armed only with a .45 caliber pistol, engaged several North Vietnamese troops in close proximity to the vehicle. Fighting his way through devastating fire and remounting his own immobilized tank, he remained fully exposed to the enemy as he bravely and skillfully engaged them with the tank's externally-mounted .50 caliber machinegun; where he remained until the situation was brought under control. Sp5c. Johnson's profound concern for his fellow soldiers, at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the U.S. Army.¹⁰⁸

This is a fact-based telling of the story, but the one we hear from D.J., that I share later, is also filled with emotion, pain, sacrifice, and guilt.

Once Johnson returned home, he struggled with what is often referred to as “survivor’s guilt;” the guilt of surviving when others did not. The guilt Johnson felt permeates all of who D.J. is within the play. Someone who knew Johnson, Eddie Wright, told a reporter ““When he came home from Vietnam he was different, sure. I noticed it, all jumpy and nervous and he had to be doing something all the time, it seems” [...] “But mostly he was the same fun-time guy.””¹⁰⁹ But the guilt, the

¹⁰⁸ “Dwight H. Johnson.” *African-American Involvement in the Vietnam War: Congressional Medal of Honor*. http://aavw.org/served/homepage_djohnson.html

¹⁰⁹ David, 233.

memory, the trauma slowly overtook him. His survivor's guilt caused him to have a difficult time adjusting back to everyday, and post-war, life. At first he had a hard time finding work. Despite being excellently trained in the military, Johnson applied for small jobs, only those with minimum qualifications. But in October 1968, the military reentered his life and changed it once again. Two MP's (military police) knocked on his door. Johnson's mother was quick to ask Johnson what he had done. The men asked if Johnson had used drugs or been arrested since he left the military. After telling them he has not, the men left. Soon after Johnson received a call from the Pentagon.¹¹⁰ Johnson was told that he was to receive the Medal of Honor in November 1968 from President Johnson. With the Medal of Honor, his luck seemed to change. The military utilized Johnson as an—"African American hero in uniform"—as a recruiter and as a figurehead.¹¹¹

Johnson signed a three-year contract to be a recruiter and began to make numerous public relations talks and appearances. The following year, in 1969, Johnson married Katrina May and later that same year they gave birth to a son, Dwight Christopher Johnson. Johnson was then leading a star-studded life; attending Nixon's inauguration, dinners hosted by the Ford Motor Company, meeting ball players and more.¹¹² Mikaelian claims "Johnson's life had become the parade that was pointedly denied to other Vietnam vets, but he felt the army was using him."¹¹³ He recognized that the stake the Army had in him was directly related to his race and his medal. He also questioned the ethics of his job, sure he was a great recruiter,

¹¹⁰ Mikaelian, 242-243.

¹¹¹ Mikaelian, 245.

¹¹² Mikaelian, 245

¹¹³ Mikaelian, 246.

but what was happening to the men he recruited? Were they sent to Vietnam? Were they sent home after Vietnam? Like many Vietnam veterans, Johnson returned home questioning his own responsibility in the war in Vietnam. Mikaelian notes that during the summer of 1970, things began to fall apart for Johnson.¹¹⁴ His army paycheck could not cover the bills and he continued to question his work. Johnson began missing events and speaking occasions. His physical and mental health was deteriorating. “He was paralyzed, the [his] lawyer speculated, by a inability to formulate a plan of action in this alien culture that he had been transported to by something that happened on the other side of the globe.”¹¹⁵ The farther away from Vietnam, the closer guilt, doubt, and fear began to creep in. In September 1970, the Army sent Johnson to Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania to be evaluated. It was there that Johnson started to talk about his time in Vietnam. Johnson was diagnosed with depression and what is now known as PTSD. It is at this hospital, the Valley Forge Army Hospital where we meet Dale Jackson (D.J.) in Cole’s *Medal of Honor Rag*.

There have been various artistic responses to Dwight Johnson—not only his actions in war, but also the actions that lead to his death. From *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, Professor Emeritus Margot Norris observes that “art’s incommensurability to war—its inability to respond with adequate and appropriate gravity, scale, and meaningfulness—can be seen to vary with the century’s different

¹¹⁴ Mikaelian, 248.

¹¹⁵ David, 238.

conflicts.”¹¹⁶ These artistic representations of the war will never match the experiences and perhaps that is not the goal. But instead, the purpose or function of art’s response to war is simply that—a response. It is an attempt to bring civilians a bit closer to war and for veterans, it is an effort to make connections, to know that others have “been there.” In 1975, Harry Chapin wrote a song about Johnson entitled “Bummer.” The lyrics of the song describe Johnson’s life, his entrance into the military, the incident in which he earned the medal, and his death. Lyrics include, “They picked up the pieces and they stitched him back together/He pulled through though they thought he was a goner/And it force them to give him what they said they would/Six purple hearts and the Medal of Honor.”¹¹⁷ The pieces of Johnson were never fully put back together. Before Johnson could come to terms with his war experiences and move on from them, Johnson was killed.

I examine his death more within the context of the play, but for purposes of placing this song in context to the events of his death it is important to know exactly what happened to Johnson. Johnson was in and out of mental health treatment programs. The “out” portions were due to Johnson going A.W.O.L. During an A.W.O.L. stint, Johnson struggled to pay for hospital bills for his wife’s surgery. Johnson took it upon himself to find money, through robbery. He entered a grocery store with the intent to rob it and despite not firing his own weapon; the manager shot him several times in the chest.¹¹⁸ Johnson was rushed to the hospital, but died

¹¹⁶ Norris, Margot. *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, 1.

¹¹⁷ Chapin, Harry. “Bummer.” *Portrait Gallery*. 1975.

¹¹⁸ This version of the story is somewhat contested. Some reports argue that perhaps Johnson was only at the store to buy diapers and that someone else was

due to the gunshot wounds. Towards the end of Chapin's song, police are standing over Johnson's body at the crime scene. The lyrics narrate the scene, "They found his gun where he'd thrown it/There was something else clenched in his fist/And when they pried his fingers open they found the Medal of Honor/And the Sergeant said: 'Where in the hell he get this?'"¹¹⁹ These lyrics highlight various elements of Johnson's life as a veteran and as a black man. "Where in the hell he get this?" questions 1) why a black man has a Medal of Honor and 2) if it is his, why is a Medal of Honor recipient robbing a grocery store? These questions are both addressed in *Medal of Honor Rag*, but not in the song "Bummer." Although a fictional telling of the event, "Bummer," much like *Medal of Honor Rag*, is based in reality. Johnson did not have the medal clinched in his fist at the time of his death, he did have a card in his wallet that recognized him as a Medal of Honor recipient, which is what the police found when they searched his wallet. The chorus of the song is the most poignant part of the lyrics, which is sung from the point of view of "the man from the precinct," "'Put him away, you better kill him instead./A bummer like that is better off dead/Someday they're gonna have to put a bullet in his head.'"¹²⁰ This song speaks of Johnson's life and death, just as Cole's play does.

there robbing the store. This version notes that the manager only *thought* Johnson was part of the robbery and therefore shot him. The official version of the story is the one that is told in the play, that Johnson was there to rob the store, but that he did not fire his gun.

¹¹⁹ Chapin.

¹²⁰ Chapin.

Michael S. Harper wrote a poem about Johnson in 1977 entitled “Debridement.”¹²¹ Debridement is defined as cutting away of dead tissue from a wound in order to prevent infection. In Harper’s poem, the “dead tissue” is a comparison to the Medal of Honor. The poem explores, in a way, how myths operate and how the concept of a “hero” is also mythic. As the importance of the medal grows, Johnson shrinks. In some respects, Johnson’s earning of the medal put him in the spotlight, but at the same time the spotlight (the medal) became more visible than the man. And when Johnson turned against the spotlight, he was then subjected to go through testing of his mental state at Valley Forge Army Hospital. The poem walks through Johnson’s life beginning with Jeffries, the housing project he grew up in through the time of his death after the attempted grocery store robbery. Arguably, the most memorable and vivid section of the poem is the portion titled “A White Friend Flies In from the Coast,” which reads,

A White Friend Flies In from the Coast
Burned—black by birth,
burned—armed with .45,
burned—submachine gun,
burned—STAC hunted VC,
burned—killing 5-20,
burned—nobody know for sure;
burned—out of ammo,
burned—killed one with gun-stock,
burned—VC AK-47 jammed,
burned—killed faceless VC,
burned—over and over,
burned—STAC subdued by three men,
burned—three shots: morphine,
burned—tried killing prisoners,
burned—taken to Pleiku,
burned—held down, straitjacket,

¹²¹ Harper, Michael S. “Debridement.” *Poetry Foundation*. 2015.
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171559>

burned—whites owe him, hear?
burned—I owe him, here.¹²²

Kyle Grimes, the Director of Graduate Students in English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, performed an analysis of the poem that explains that “The opening line of the poem, ‘*Burned*—black by birth,’ associates the black of charred flesh with the black of race, thus graphically presenting the consequences of the white exploitation of blacks [...]” The final line, “*burned*—whites owe him, hear?,” according to Grimes, “underscores the reading by emphasizing the indebtedness of generic white culture to the black hero-victim.”¹²³ The idea, and reality, of the treatment of Johnson during and after the war that makes him into the “black hero-victim” is present in each of these artistic representations of him. I have shared these in hopes of placing emphasis on the significance of Johnson’s narrative as part of the archive of the Vietnam War veteran. With Cole’s play, we are able to hear, or re-hear, Johnson’s narrative, but also hear an imagined story leading up to the death of a Vietnam War hero and victim.

Text Analysis and Theoretical Applications

A description of the play by J.W. Fenn in *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era* reads, “In *Medal of Honor Rag*, the stresses of daily life in a noncombat environment are exacerbated by the memories of Vietnam, and Cole presents another case in which a veteran’s war experience

¹²² Harper.

¹²³ Grimes, Kyle. “The Entropics of Discourse: Michael Harper’s Debridement and the Myth of the Hero.” *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol. 24, No. 3. (Autumn 1990): 427-428.

impedes his social reintegration.”¹²⁴ The title of Cole’s play, *Medal of Honor Rag*, indicates not only the Medal of Honor recipient, but also the “rag” referencing something of a lower quality; something to be stuck with. Sarah Blacher Cohen, a playwright and past-professor at SUNY Albany, and Joanne B. Koch, Professor of English at National Louis University, write in *Shared Stages: Ten American Dramas of Blacks and Jews* (2007), “The ‘rag’ of the iconic title is still less a lively interaction and more a dance macabre in which society fails to rescue its Black heroes.”¹²⁵ It is up for debate how to rescue Johnson or whether he needed rescuing, and how to go about rescuing him is up for debate and perhaps that’s what Cole is attempting to do in *Medal of Honor Rag*. In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989), Susan Jeffords addresses representations of Vietnam and how they reveal “the ways in which contemporary popular narratives are repressing class or race differences as relevant concerns.”¹²⁶ The play’s examination of the war and particularly of how this individual man survived speaks to current conflicts and the use of theatre to grapple with these topics as well as serving as an agent for social change. *Medal of Honor Rag* can speak of continuing race relations across the United States.

The text for *Medal of Honor Rag*, provides great detail and insight in terms of production as well as general text analysis. In this particular case many of the details and much of the story are based on truthful events, people, and quotes. “The

¹²⁴ Fenn, 212.

¹²⁵ Blacher Cohen, Sarah and Joanne B. Koch. *Shared Stages: Ten American Dramas of Blacks and Jews*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 289.

¹²⁶ Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, 180.

characters in this play are fictional, but the events reported are all drawn from experiences and testimony of the period.”¹²⁷ The character of the Doctor, who is never named, is described as “A white man in his early Forties, informal, hard-working (even overworked---the youngish doctor with simultaneous commitments to hospital, private patients, writing, family, research, teaching, public health, public issues, committees, special projects). White shirt and bow tie, soft jacket, somewhat weary. He is of European background, but came to this country as a child. Possessor of a dry wit, which he is not averse to using, for therapeutic purposes.”¹²⁸ Dale Jackson, the character based on Dwight Johnson, is described as “A black man two weeks before his 24th birthday, erect and even stiff in bearing, intelligent, handsome, restrained. An effect of power and great potential being held in for hidden reasons. Like the doctor, given to his own slants of humor as a way of dealing with people and, apparently, of holding them off.”¹²⁹ Jackson goes by D.J. in the play and I will refer to him as such. There is a third character present for portions of the play, a Military Guard who is only present briefly.

The play takes place in an office of the Valley Forge Army Hospital, in Pennsylvania, on April 23, 1971.¹³⁰ The scene is set, “An office, but not the doctor’s own office. No signs of personal adaptation—looks more like an institutional space used by many different people, which is what it is. Rather small. A desk, folding metal chair for the patient, a more comfortable chair for the doctor. Wastebasket.

¹²⁷ Cole, 5.

¹²⁸ Cole, 5.

¹²⁹ Cole, 6.

¹³⁰ Cole, 5.

Ash tray.”¹³¹ The starkness of the stage allows for the story to be highlighted and for D.J.’s reality—of being surrounded by nothingness while in the hospital—to be ever present for the audience. As I will address in Chapter 3, *Tracers* relies heavily on the use of music, but *Medal of Honor Rag* only has two mentions of music. The first is laid out at the top of the script, “Fixin-to-Die-Rag” by Country Joe and the Fish. The stage directions note that productions should play “A few verses: to bring back the mood of Vietnam.”¹³² “Fixin’-to-Die-Rag” was written in 1967, soon after Dwight Johnson joined the Army. The title, of course, uses “rag” in the same way that *Medal of Honor Rag* does. The play is an accusation of “Uncle Sam” asking for mothers and fathers to give their sons up to fight in Vietnam. The only other song is when Doc “whistles a bit of the Mozart G-minor Symphony,” which has a bit of a tragic tone to it.¹³³ This is just one of the many differences, among the many similarities, between *Still Life*, *Tracers*, and *Medal of Honor Rag*. Also, this play is performed without an intermission. We hear, see, and feel the tension as it builds to a breaking point between Doctor and D.J. We are forced to live in their reality and D.J.’s mind for ninety minutes.

The Psychological and Logistical Difference of the Vietnam War

In a psychiatric study from the Minneapolis Veterans’ Administration Hospital they found that the mental state of Vietnam veterans was not the same as World War I and World War II veterans. “The Vietnam veteran is different ‘in

¹³¹ Cole, 6.

¹³² Cole, 6-7.

¹³³ Cole, 19.

tendencies toward greater discontent with their life situation, greater proneness to delinquent behavior, less respect for others, less trust, and diminished feelings of social responsibility.”¹³⁴ The notion that the Vietnam veteran is unique in terms of United States military veterans is a constant presence throughout much of the cultural representations of the war and in *Medal of Honor Rag*. The difference is seen in how they were treated before, during, and after the war especially in terms of the response to mental health issues. *Still Life* and *Tracers* address forms and variations of PTSD in men and women, but *Medal of Honor Rag* directly examines the severity of it.

Like many veterans (and active service men and women), D.J. was passed from doctor to doctor and therapist to therapist to try to “fix” or “cure” him. Fenn notes, the tension in the play is “generated through D.J.’s alternating acceptance and rejection of the Doctor’s efforts to help him.”¹³⁵ When D.J. enters at the top of the play, he calls attention to yet another change in doctors. When Doctor asks if he would rather see his previous doctor. D.J. responds, “No, man...it’s just that I have to keep telling the same story over and over again.”¹³⁶ As many times as Dwight Johnson has told his story, his story has also been told over and over again via D.J. The story was written in books, articles, and as I discussed earlier, numerous artistic representations. This remains an issue today, soldiers have to tell and retell their story countless times. In some ways, the telling can be a positive experience. *The Telling Project* is a great example of the retelling of stories. Military men and women,

¹³⁴ Polner, 144.

¹³⁵ Fenn, 214.

¹³⁶ Cole, 8.

as well as family members of service men and women are given the opportunity to tell their story on stage. It is a project for the tellers, but also for the listeners, the community. The mission of *The Telling Project* is to deepen the understanding of military and veteran experiences. The website states, “Greater understanding fosters receptivity, easing veterans’ transitions back to civil society, and allowing communities to benefit from the skills and experience they bring with them.” They believe that this deepened understanding will create community connections. The work *The Telling Project* performs is to “give veterans and military family members the opportunity to speak, and their communities the opportunity to listen.”¹³⁷ Many of the participants find this to be a cathartic event. In fall 2015, I participated in the Kansas City edition of *The Telling Project*. One of the fellow cast members, Ted (who I have mentioned before) participated in numerous productions prior to Kansas City. For him, it was painful and yet healing, to repeat his story. For others, the process of repetition can be dangerous.

In October 2015, NPR did a story about an Army sniper, Staff Sergeant Eric James, who served multiple tours in Iraq. James struggled with PTSD and was fed up with being passed from doctor to therapist to psychologist. He was frustrated with repeating his story and his symptoms over and over again. In April 2014, James went to another appointment with a therapist at Fort Carson and clicked record on his phone. In that session, he told his therapist that he was considering suicide and was “inadvertently helping to bring a problem within the Army to light. As it tries to deal with thousands of soldiers who misbehave after returning from Iraq and

¹³⁷ *The Telling Project*. “About Us.” *The Telling Project*.
<http://thetellingproject.org/about/>

Afghanistan and then being diagnosed with mental health disorders and traumatic brain injuries, the military sometimes moves to kick them out of the service rather than provide the treatment they need.”¹³⁸ In the end, James recorded over twenty hours of sessions with therapists and officers. Some of the recordings are shocking to hear. At one point, the person James is talking to tells him that his experiences in Iraq were not as traumatic as he is making them out to be. And he is even brushed off when he tells them that he wants to commit suicide.¹³⁹ Perhaps the most shocking part of this story is that it is recent. When doctors, therapists, and psychologist were trying to understand and diagnose PTSD, many veterans slipped through without help. But the issue is no longer the lack of knowledge, but something else: a lack of resources, time, energy, effort, or simply attention. This has caused a lack of trust, similar to what we see in D.J.

Like Staff Sergeant Eric James, D.J. has considered suicide himself. D.J. tells Doc, “Every doctor has his own tricks” and he describes the sessions as a “farce.”¹⁴⁰ He has been through so many doctors that by this point, it must feel like a revolving door. D.J. attempts to test Doctor. Soon after D.J. tells Doctor, in reference to the folder with his information, “No, man, I mean, what do you think? You got that folder there. My life is in there. I’m getting near the end of the line with this stuff. I mean, sometimes I feel like there’s not much time. You know?”¹⁴¹ “Not much time” is the

¹³⁸ Zwerdling, Daniel. “Missed Treatment: Soldiers with Mental Health Issues Dismissed for ‘Misconduct.’” *NPR*. 28 October 2015.

<http://www.npr.org/2015/10/28/451146230/missed-treatment-soldiers-with-mental-health-issues-dismissed-for-misconduct>

¹³⁹ Zwerdling.

¹⁴⁰ Cole, 9.

¹⁴¹ Cole, 10.

first hint at suicide from D.J. A few pages later, D.J. angrily says to Doctor, “If I knew what to tell to make me feel better, I woulda done it a long time ago. I ain’t the doctor, I can’t cure myself...Except for one way, maybe.”¹⁴² And again “one way” is his way of indicating suicide. These comments are limited and are only suggestions; we get no indication that he has seriously considered taking his own life. As we learn throughout the play, D.J. is sometimes a spinning top. He unleashes his anger as a reaction to his surroundings and to test Doc. He knows what is in his file and he wants to know what Doctor thinks of him and his past. The file becomes an object of great value in the play. D.J.’s use of “no,” “nothing,” “you tell me,” comments throughout the play are because he knows that the answers are contained within the file. When the doctor is able to pull information from D.J. there are glimpses of who he really is. Doctor, reading from the file, “Subject is bright. His ARMY G.T. rating is equivalent of 128 I.Q. In first interviews does not volunteer information—”¹⁴³ Then the stage directions say that Doctor smiles at D.J. and D.J. allows himself a, “small smile of recognition in return.” Doc then continues reading, “He related he grew up in a Detroit ghetto and never knew his natural father. He sort of laughed when he said he was a ‘good boy’ and always did what was expected of him. Was an Explorer Scout and an altar boy...”¹⁴⁴ This quote is pulled from the quote I provided earlier where Johnson is described as an “Explorer Scout. Altar boy. Good grades, active in choir and drama. Extremely bright, with an army GT rating equivalent to an

¹⁴² Cole, 15.

¹⁴³ GT stands for “General Technical,” which is a test that examines word knowledge, paragraph comprehension, and arithmetic reasoning.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁴ Cole, 10-11.

IQ of 120.”¹⁴⁵ Direct quotes from his military record, interviews, and other documents are brought directly into the play. Cole had many resources to pull from, but as far as Johnson’s emotions, feelings, and reactions, that is where Cole’s artistic freedom takes over. Not to imply that Cole’s account is not truthful, but a means of telling Johnson’s story the best way he can.

Throughout the play, D.J. goes through a variety of emotions from grief to sadness to rage. The goal of the meetings between D.J. and Doc is to provide an opportunity for D.J. to speak openly about his past and his experiences, but this remains a challenge for D.J. throughout the play. He has a wall up that the doctor must attempt to tear down. The moments of testing Doc are where D.J. reinforces his walls. One example is when D.J. says to Doc, in reference to the “other” doctor that he used to see, “Yeah, well he was the chief doctor here. The chief doctor for all the psychoes [sic] in Valley Forge Army Hospital!”¹⁴⁶ He plays with Doc by the use of “psychos.” D.J.’s fear of becoming insane is continually present. Through humor as well as sincerity, he exhibits awareness of his own mental state. D.J.’s distrust grows with each new doctor he meets, but we get the impression that this doctor is different from the others that D.J. has seen. Doc says, “I do a lot of work with Vietnam veterans and their problems” and mentions that he specializes in grief.¹⁴⁷ Grief is a theme present in D.J.’s life in and out of the army hospital and it seems to play a major role in D.J.’s PTSD. He feels the grief of losing men on (and off) the battlefield and realizes the grief is caused by his own actions. Perhaps, D.J. even

¹⁴⁵ Mikaelian, 241.

¹⁴⁶ Cole, 11.

¹⁴⁷ Cole, 10.

grieves the loss of who he was before Vietnam and before receiving the medal. His grief hangs so heavily on him that D.J. asks Doctor, flat out, “Am I crazy?” Doc says the only thing he can say, “Maybe a little bit. But it’s temporary...It can be cured.”¹⁴⁸ In this play, grief, sanity, and guilt are very much connected. And in the moments of openness D.J. becomes vulnerable and then immediately defensive. This is seen in an interchange about halfway through the play.

D.J. – Man, I take off my skin, and you just piss all over me! And...

Doc. – You want me to take my skin off, too. That’s what you want?

D.J. – I want to get better! I don’t want to be crazy!¹⁴⁹

Because D.J. shares personal information with the Doctor about doubting his sanity, he wants the Doctor to share with him. But Doc informs him, “Normally it’s better that you *not* know about your doctor’s personal—” and D.J. cuts him off, “*Normally?! Man, this ain’t normally!*”¹⁵⁰ The stage directions tell us that Doctor considers D.J.’s point about what is normal and standard practice, “The DOCTOR considers this, as a serious proposition. Historically, the abnormal war. The desperation of this man. And he goes ahead, against his own reluctance.” The Vietnam War as a “historically abnormal war” is at the same time a trope of the war and the reality of it. Not that any two wars are alike, but there are many elements that set this war apart from the others. It is vital that Doc acknowledges this distinction for D.J. to trust him. As we learned, Doctor works with Vietnam veterans, so he is well aware of the history of the war, but he still must prove himself to D.J. Doc dives in to his story to open up just as D.J. opened up to him,

¹⁴⁸ Cole, 22.

¹⁴⁹ Cole, 27.

¹⁵⁰ Cole, 27.

All right. All right...I wasn't born here. I'm from Poland. I had a Jewish grandmother, but I was brought up as a regular kid. All right?...Life in Poland tends to get confusing. Either the Russians or Germans are always rolling in, flattening the villages and setting fire to people. You've got the picture? Anyway, World War II came, the Nazis, the SS troops, and this time the Jewish kids were supposed to be killed—sent to Camps, gassed, starved, worked to death, beaten to death. That was the program...I didn't think of myself as Jewish. We didn't burn candles on Friday night, none of that. I wasn't Jewish. But my mother's mother was. So, to the Nazis I was Jewish. So, I should be dead now. I shouldn't be here. You're looking at someone who "should" be dead, like you...See? They sent me to one of those Camps. But I was saved, by an accident...You understand what I'm saying? Someone came along—a businessman—and he said he would buy some Jewish children, and the Nazis could use the money for armaments, or whatever. A deal. One grey morning—it was quite warm—they just lined us up, and started counting heads. When they got to the number the gentleman had payed [sic] for, they stopped. I got counted. The ones who didn't—my brother and sister and the others—they all died. But not me. For what reason? *There was no reason*...So, that's it. Eventually, I ended up over here, I lied about my age, got into the Army at the end of the War. I thought I wanted revenge. But now I know that I wanted to die, back over there. To get shot. But I failed. Came back, and I even marched in a Victory Parade, with my unit! So I was luckier than you, D.J. ...But still, I didn't know why I hadn't died when everyone else did. I thought it must have been magic, and that it was my fault the others were dead—a kind of trade-off, you see, where my survival accounted for their deaths. My parents, everybody. I became quite sick. Depressed, dead-feeling...¹⁵¹

Doc's honesty and willingness to share this story surprises D.J. despite asking for him to tell it. D.J. asks, "How did you get better?" Doc answers, "The same way you will."¹⁵² It is here that we learn of Doc's own military experiences, though they were far different from D.J.'s.

Early on in the play when D.J. first enters he says to the doctor, "You're not in the Army, huh?" Doc responds with a twinkle, "How can you tell?" D.J. answers, "Your salute is not of the snappiest."¹⁵³ This indicates, for D.J., how he responds to the

¹⁵¹ Cole, 28-29.

¹⁵² Cole, 29.

¹⁵³ Cole, 8.

world around him and specifically the people in it. D.J. “reads” people and makes a judgment. D.J. asks Doctor if he was in World War II. Doc was not, but he tells D.J. that he remembers the parades, banners, and ticker tape.¹⁵⁴ Murray Polner, a scholar and editor, explains in *No Victory Parades* (1971), “Born at a time of rapid political, social, and technological change, reflecting both the hopes and anxieties of the post-World War II years in which they came to adulthood, these young men left military service filled with doubts about the kind of war they were forced to fight, about their country’s leaders, and about the sanctity of their America.”¹⁵⁵ Doc’s story is similar to Dale Elkmeier’s experience that he shares in *The Telling Project*. Dale served in the Army, in active duty, for thirty years. He retired at the rank of Colonel. He served in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, and the Middle East. Some of his assignments included duty with the 7th Infantry Division, 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red 1), and the 101st Airborne Division. He did combat tours in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In *The Telling Project: Kansas City*, Dale said, “My father, in fact, all my friends’ fathers were in World War II.” For Dale’s generation, it was just the “thing to do.” He continued, “Even as a young kid I knew I wanted to be a soldier. Where I came from, I don’t know...it was innate. Maybe I was hardwired for it.”¹⁵⁶ Polner notes, “Nevertheless, there are ominous signs that this war was indeed a different war, and this veteran will indeed be different from the veteran of his father’s and his

¹⁵⁴ Cole, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Polner, Murray. *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, xiv.

¹⁵⁶ *The Telling Project: Kansas City*. Jonathan Wei, Ed. Directed by Erin Merritt. National World War I Museum, Kansas City, MO. October 2015.

grandfather's generations."¹⁵⁷ Throughout the play, World War II is a touchstone for Doc to try to connect with D.J. It is his only comparison to what D.J. experienced.

The Wounds of War

Medal of Honor Rag describes, to varying degrees, being wounded in war. Often it seems as though veterans are more comfortable or at least more willing to tell the stories that have been told to them or of instances they witnessed rather than what happened to their own body. It is the same distancing or separating that I discussed previously. The distance allows for a disconnect or perhaps a clarity in retelling the story. D.J. responds similarly in *Medal of Honor Rag*, as he tells Doc, "It's about the other guys, in The Nam. Stories we used to hear."¹⁵⁸ D.J. starts in on a story he was told about some men towards the end of their yearlong duty in Vietnam. D.J. compares it to computer programming "you know, we had to be there for 365 days on the button, right? Like, we got fed into one end of the computer and if we stayed lucky the computer would shit us back out again, one year later."¹⁵⁹ The infantrymen spent months in the jungle and "their feet are rotting, they see torture, burnings, people being skinned alive—stories they're never going to tell no doctor, believe me."¹⁶⁰ Here D.J. brings the doctor back into the story. He tries to explain to Doctor that he had never seen the kind of things he saw in Vietnam. The Doctor indicates that he is going to interrupt, but then he stops. D.J. says, "You never seen your best friend's head blown right off his body so you can look right down in his neck-hole.

¹⁵⁷ Polner, 143.

¹⁵⁸ Cole, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Cole, 15.

¹⁶⁰ Cole, 15.

You never seen somebody you loved, I'm telling you like I mean it, somebody you loved and you get there and it's nothing but a black lump, smells like a charcoal dinner, and that's your friend, right?—a black lump. You never seen anything like that, am I right?"¹⁶¹ D.J. explains to Doc, that these men have been through all of those things and they have worked and struggled to stay alive. But despite efforts and focus to remain alive, men "in the middle of a big firefight with 50-caliber round, tracers, all kinds of shit flying all over the place, they'll just stand up. [...] Yes, start firing into the trees, screaming at the enemy to come out and fight. ...Maybe not screaming. Just standing straight up. [...] Get their heads blown off."¹⁶² They must remain present, on constant alert to stay safe. In this play, it is less about those wounded, but more about those that have died and those wounded mentally.

In conjunction with having been wounded in war or while in the service, there are conflicting opinions about the purpose and effectiveness of the Veterans Administration (VA). In the past few years, a light has been shed on the bureaucratic mess that is a part of the VA. Having spoken with numerous veterans, the degrees of appreciation or hatred for the organization ranges based on severity of health concerns and individual VA locations. Another story that Ted, from *The Telling Project: Kansas City*, shared was about his personal experience with the VA. Even fifteen years later, after the end of Ted's service, he struggled with PTSD, depression, and moral injury. Ted was even homeless for a time being. He moved to Saint Cloud, Minnesota to utilize the services of the VA hospital there. Ted said, "I would say the VA tries hard, but they are overwhelmed and too understaffed to deal with the

¹⁶¹ Cole, 16.

¹⁶² Cole, 16.

effects of almost fifteen years of war.”¹⁶³ According to Ted, the VA does not know how to address or handle the issue of moral injury. A volume of *PTSD Research Quarterly* from 2012 quotes a definition of moral injury as “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”¹⁶⁴ Through his years of dealing with PTSD Ted began to learn more and more about the concept of moral injury. With his understanding came a stronger connection between his military service and his depression. Ted explained, “I have learned things that make me doubt our mission during Desert Shield/Desert Storm. While I did help with the liberation of Kuwait, deep down I feel as if I was more part of the muscle for the mafia.”¹⁶⁵ He expressed this numerous times in rehearsals—the personal guilt and feeling like he was a hired hand. A little over a year ago, Ted was going to the Minneapolis VA weekly for an hour-long appointment with a therapist when he was told, “You have exhausted the mental health resources available to you through the VA. Continuing to fight the fact that you have PTSD and depression will only cause you greater suffering.”¹⁶⁶ He was assigned a new therapist, whom he did not like, and switched to a thirty-minute slot, once a month. Ted understood that there were limited resources and perhaps he was not “showing improvement,” he was right to question, “Is this how we should treat our veterans?” And he continued, “At that time I was almost one of the twenty-two veterans a day who commit suicide. We can spend over \$1.5 trillion dollars on a

¹⁶³ *The Telling Project: Kansas City.*

¹⁶⁴ Maguen, Shira and Brett Litz. “Moral Injury in Veterans of War.” *PTSD Research Quarterly*. Vol. 23, No. 1. 2012, 1.

¹⁶⁵ *The Telling Project: Kansas City.*

¹⁶⁶ *The Telling Project: Kansas City.*

new aircraft, the F-35, that doesn't fulfill the mission requirements, but we can't spend money to hire and train more therapists?"¹⁶⁷ This is a valid question that is continually asked of the VA. In the play, D.J. mentions that he used to go to the VA to "stand in line for my check." And Doc asks, "How did they treat you down there at the Veterans' Office?" His answer is brief, "Like shit."¹⁶⁸ If D.J. cannot get help from the VA, where can he get help? Where should he go?

One of D.J.'s tactics for dealing with this depression and grief was to not deal with it, to escape. He tells the Doctor, as if he does not already know, "I went AWOL twice. From this hospital." When a soldier goes A.W.O.L., it is often associated with some sort of mental break down. It could be caused by something as simple as frustration with the job to something as complex as guilt and anxiety. Doc acts as though he did not know that D.J. had gone A.W.O.L. and responds, "Oh?" D.J. continues, "But they'll never do anything to me."¹⁶⁹ Perhaps it is the lack of response or at least the lack of consequence that gets to D.J. Maybe attention is all he needs and wants, but only if that attention is coming from someone who can "fix" him. Towards the end of the play, Doc reads from D.J.'s folder, "Maalox and bland diet prescribed. G.I. series conducted. Results negative. Subject given 30-day convalescent leave 16 October 1970. Absent Without Leave until 12 January 1971, when subject returned to Army hospital on own volition. Subsequent hearing recommended dismissal of A.W.O.L. charge and back pay reinstated...in cognizance

¹⁶⁷ *The Telling Project: Kansas City.*

¹⁶⁸ Cole, 35.

¹⁶⁹ Cole, 9.

of subject's outstanding record in Vietnam."¹⁷⁰ A.W.O.L. also has a negative connotation within the ranks. At times, it is viewed as weakness. In the recent second season of the podcast "Serial," hosted by Sarah Koenig she addresses this notion of A.W.O.L. Koenig is investigating the case of Bowe Bergdahl. Bergdahl was an Army sergeant who spent five years in captivity by the Taliban in Afghanistan after he walked off base in 2009. Bergdahl claims to have left the base to cause a dustwun (an abbreviation for "duty status—whereabouts unknown") to call attention to what he viewed as incompetent leadership. A dustwun could be described as the next step of A.W.O.L. as it represents the status of a service member who is not only missing when he/she should be present, but cannot be located at all. Another term that is presented is "deserter." Deserter is applied on the thirty-first day of a service member who is A.W.O.L. The uproar around the case of Bergdahl is an example of the severity of these actions about a service member. D.J. never went A.W.O.L. long enough to be classified as a deserter. Perhaps D.J. used his A.W.O.L. status as another test. But after his test, he recognized that there were no consequences for it. The hospital is trying to help him, there are too many others to focus on as well. And how does one go about "punishing" a mentally unstable veteran who received the Medal of Honor?

Commemorating the War

One of the questions I ask of history and these plays is, how *were* and how *are* the lives of soldiers and veterans archived and recorded? In *Medal of Honor Rag*,

¹⁷⁰ Cole, 40. This is factual information and details from his actual record.

D.J.'s world is created by how he exists on paper—in his military records. Much of D.J.'s (and therefore Johnson's) story is communicated through the forms in his folder. Early in the play D.J. tests Doc. D.J. and Doc use the folder as the ball that is volleyed back and forth between them. D.J. wants to see what Doc knows and what he does not know, how he can trick Doc, and where he can pull the wool over his eyes. But Doc is prepared for this, "How dumb do you think I am?" D.J. answers, "I ain't decided yet. I don't have a folder on you with your scores in it."¹⁷¹ Here, D.J. is referencing his own folder full of details of past appointments, health records, and of course, his military history including many of the details presented throughout this section. Doc is willing to let D.J. push him on this matter. He responds, "Yes. You're a very witty man, very quick—as long as the things we touch on don't really matter to you."¹⁷² Just as D.J. challenged Doc, Doc challenges D.J., "But when they do [meaning when things do matter to D.J.], you go numb. You claim to feel nothing. Do you recognize what I'm saying?" D.J. replies with a common answer of his, "I don't know." Doc jumps right back with, "Even your voice goes flat."¹⁷³ Here we see the Doctor calling attention to D.J.'s performance versus reality.

Doc attempts to engage D.J. by telling him of a case study that he is working on. He tells D.J. that he is still trying to figure out the story. He begins to read from a folder,

[T]rying to write it out for himself...about a certain man who was an unusual type for the world he came from. [...] Rather gentle, and decent in manner...almost always easygoing and humorous. Noted for that. As a kid in a tough neighborhood, he had been trained by his mother to survive by

¹⁷¹ Cole, 18.

¹⁷² Cole, 18.

¹⁷³ Cole, 18.

combining the virtues of a Christian and a sprinter: he turned the other cheek and ran faster than anyone else...¹⁷⁴

It is here that the stage directions note that D.J. begins to listen with interest. Doctor continues, “This man was sent by his country to fight in a war. A war unlike any war he might have imagined. Brutal, without glory, without meaning, without good wishes for those who were sent to fight and without gratitude for those who returned.”¹⁷⁵ At this point it is clear that Doc is telling D.J.’s story. But D.J. allows him to continue,

He was trained to kill people of another world in their own homes, in order to help them. He was assigned to a tank and grew close with the others in the crew, as men always do in a war. He and his friends in that tank were relatively fortunate—for almost a year they lived through insufferable heat, insects, boredom, but were never drawn into heavy combat. Then one night he was given orders assigning him to a different tank. For what reason?

D.J. immediately answers, “There was no reason. [...] It was the Army.”¹⁷⁶ Doc repeats D.J.’s words, “It was the Army.” Here, the story goes into detail of an event that lead to D.J.’s mental state and the Medal of Honor. Doc continues telling/reading the story,

The next day, his platoon of four M-48 tanks were driving along a road toward a place called Dakto, which meant nothing to him. Suddenly they were ambushed. First, by enemy rockets, which destroyed two of the tanks. Then, enemy soldiers came out of the woods to attack the two tanks still in commission. This man we were speaking of was in one of those tanks. But the tank with his old friends, the tank he would have been in—¹⁷⁷

Again, D.J. interrupts correcting Doc, “Should have been in.” Doc continues,

—the tank that he might have been in—that tank was on fire. It was about sixty feet away, and the crew he had spent eleven months and twenty-two

¹⁷⁴ Cole, 20.

¹⁷⁵ Cole, 20.

¹⁷⁶ Cole, 20.

¹⁷⁷ Cole, 20-21.

days with in Vietnam was trapped inside it... (*D.J. looks away, in pain.*) He hoisted himself out and ran into the other tank. Speaking of standing up in a firefight... Why he wasn't hit by the heavy crossfire we'll never know. He pulled out the first man he came to in the turret. The body was blackened, charred, but still alive. That was one of his friends.¹⁷⁸

The story goes on, as Doc spells out the details,

Then the tank's artillery shells exploded, killing everyone left inside. He saw the bodies of his other friends all burned and blasted, and then—for 30 minutes, armed first with a 45-caliber pistol and then with a submachine gun he hunted the Vietnamese on the ground, killing from ten to twenty enemy soldiers (no one knows for sure)—by himself. When he ran out of ammunition, he killed one with the stock of his submachine gun.¹⁷⁹

The story comes to an end with Doc's description of D.J. being taken down by three men and three shots of morphine. Doc explains, "He was raving. He tried to kill the prisoners they had rounded up. They took him away to a hospital in Pleiku in a straightjacket. Twenty-four hours later he was released from that hospital, and within 48 hours he was home again in Detroit, with a medical discharge..."¹⁸⁰ This is D.J.'s narrative, as told by his military and mental health documents.

The first mention of the medal comes on page eleven of script and then it remains a presence throughout the play's entirety. Doctor and D.J. are discussing depression and how the previous doctor told D.J. that he had depression and how he should get rid of "it." There is a play on words here; at first D.J. is talking about "it" as depression, then "it" becomes the medal. D.J. says that he would like to throw "it" in their faces, but he recognizes he does not know whose "face" to throw it in. The two men become confused by the use of "it" and Doctor says, "You meant the medal,

¹⁷⁸ Cole, 21.

¹⁷⁹ Cole, 21.

¹⁸⁰ Cole, 21-22. Pleiku is a city in the central area of Vietnam. Its central location made it an important place during the Vietnam War.

didn't you, when you said, 'throw it in their faces'?" D.J. responds, "Well. That's why you're here, right? Because of the medal?"¹⁸¹ D.J. knows that is the reason he is there, but he continues to explain his point.

Oh man...Oh, my...Suppose I didn't have that medal...You wouldn't be here, right? You wouldn't know me from a hole in the wall, I mean, I would be invisible to you. Like a hundred thousand other dudes that got themselves sent over there to be shot at by a lot of Chinamen hiding up in the trees. I mean, you're some famous doctor, right? Because, you know, I'm a special case! Well I am, I am one big tidbit. I am what you call a "hot property" in this man's army. Yes, sir! I am an authentic hero, a showpiece. One look at me, enlistments go up 200%...I am a credit to my race. Did you know that? I am an honor to the city of Detroit, to say nothing of the state of Michigan, of which I am the only living Medal of Honor winner! I am a feather in the cap of the Army, a flower in the lapel of the military—I mean, I am *quoting* to you, man! That is what they say at banquets, given in *my* honor! Yes, sir! And look at me! *Look at me! (pointing to himself in the clothing of a sick man, in an office of an Army hospital)*¹⁸²

Again, D.J. talks about being a "showpiece," someone who is almost a stand in for the person he is. The doctor responds as honest as he can, "I'm here because you're here." [...] "You ask, would I be here if you hadn't been given that medal. But if you hadn't been given that medal, you wouldn't be here either."¹⁸³ But the truth is, yes, in reality Johnson was assigned the chief psychiatrist because of his "record and high visibility."¹⁸⁴ As Fenn points out it is the possession of the medal that is the source of D.J.'s anxiety as "the award has proven a mixed blessing: D.J.'s opinion is that his condition would be ignored if he did not occupy such a prominent place in

¹⁸¹ Cole, 11.

¹⁸² Cole, 11-12.

¹⁸³ Cole, 12.

¹⁸⁴ Mikaelian, 250.

the public consciousness.”¹⁸⁵ This is what the play hinges on; who would D.J. be if he had not gone to war? If he had not earned the Medal of Honor?

D.J. tells the story of discovering he was to receive the Medal of Honor. It matches the actual story of Johnson discussed earlier. D.J. tells the doctor that he had been home eight or nine months when he received a call from “some Army office.”¹⁸⁶ As the story goes, they asked him if he was clean and if he had been arrested since returning home. D.J. defends himself and tells them that he is clean and to leave him alone. Not long after, two MPs arrive at the house and “scare the shit out of my mama.”¹⁸⁷ They again ask if he has been clean. D.J. explains, “She makes me roll up my sleeves right there, to show—no tracks, see?”¹⁸⁸ But regardless, his mother thinks he is in some kind of trouble. “And all I can do is sit there in the kitchen and laugh at her, which makes her mad, and even more sure I done something weird,” D.J. continues.¹⁸⁹ Minutes later, D.J. receives a call from a Colonel from the Department of Defense in Washington and he “tells me they’re going to give me the Congressional Medal of Honor, and could I come down to Washington right away, with my family, as President Lyndon B. Johnson himself [sic] wants to hang it around my neck, with his own hands.”¹⁹⁰ D.J. finds himself headed to D.C., “Yesterday afternoon for all they knew I was a junkie on the streets, today the President of the United States can’t wait to see me.”¹⁹¹ The stage directions tell

¹⁸⁵ Fenn, 213.

¹⁸⁶ Cole, 37.

¹⁸⁷ Cole, 37.

¹⁸⁸ Cole, 37.

¹⁸⁹ Cole, 37.

¹⁹⁰ Cole, 37.

¹⁹¹ Cole, 37.

us that Doc picks up the cassette recorder and turns it on, playing the voice of President Lyndon B. Johnson from the ceremony. President Lyndon B. Johnson was the one to hang the medal on D.J.'s neck as D.J. cried.¹⁹² From the recorder we hear,

Secretary Resor...General Westmoreland...Distinguished guests and members of the family...Our hearts and our hopes are turned to peace as we assemble here in the East Room this morning. All our efforts are being bent in its pursuit. But in this company—" (*DOCTOR points the recorder at D.J.*) "we hear again, in our minds, the sounds of distant battle..." (*The DOCTOR turns the volume down, and the voice of L.B.J. drones quietly in the background, as he waits for D.J.'s reaction.*)¹⁹³

D.J.'s responds, "Ain't that a lot of shit?"¹⁹⁴ We hear LBJ's voice again from the recorder,

This room echoes once more to those words that describe the heights of bravery in war—above and beyond the call of duty. Five heroic sons of America come to us today from the tortured field of Vietnam. They come to remind us that so long as that conflict continues our purpose and our hopes rest on the steadfast bravery of young men in battle. These five soldiers, in their separate moments of supreme testing, summoned a degree of courage that stirs wonder and respect and an overpowering pride in all of us. Through their spectacular courage they set themselves apart in a very select company...¹⁹⁵

These are the words from the President Johnson's speech that day, but it could have easily been a speech for any Medal of Honor ceremony because with President Johnson's words he speaks of heroism, bravery, and respect that often are not appointed to the veterans of this war.

¹⁹² Cole, 14.

¹⁹³ Cole, 37. "Secretary Resor" is Stanley Rogers Resor (1917-2012). Resor was the United States Secretary of the Army during the Vietnam War. He was appointed by President Johnson in 1965 and he remained the Secretary until 1971. "General Westmoreland" (1914-2005) was a United States Army General, who was in command from 1964-1968. Many of the failings of the Vietnam War are blamed on Westmoreland.

¹⁹⁴ Cole, 37-38.

¹⁹⁵ Cole, 38.

Again, Doctor asks D.J. why he received the medal. D.J. replies, “I got that medal because I went totally out of my fucking skull and killed everything that crossed my sight.”¹⁹⁶ This is a common theme in veterans—a lack of memory or a lack of detailed memory. Often adrenaline kicks in and their training and survival instincts take over and they act with no time to ponder or reflect their actions. Rebecca Schneider explains that “The traumatized soldier, for instance, unwittingly prepares for and re-lives a battle in the future that, due to the shock of the event in the past, he or she could neither adequately experience nor account for at the time.”¹⁹⁷ This is perhaps what allows soldiers to continue to fight. D.J. goes on to say, “They say I wanted to kill all the prisoners. *Me.*”¹⁹⁸ Here he implies that he does not remember and the Doctor questions this. D.J. tells him that he only remembers moments. Doctor says to D.J., “You had to re-live that story, that flash of combat when a man’s life is changed forever.”¹⁹⁹ Oral and written histories of Vietnam veterans often have a moment in which “a man’s life is changed forever.” Those words appear in many tellings of Vietnam War experiences by veterans. After those words are uttered or written, they are frequently followed by violence (wounding or death) or by an act of heroism.

Soldiers Coming Home: PTSD

Doctor asks D.J. about what happened upon returning home. Doc asks D.J. if he ever shared his experiences with people back home, specifically if he ever told

¹⁹⁶ Cole, 39.

¹⁹⁷ Schneider, 22.

¹⁹⁸ Cole, 39.

¹⁹⁹ Cole, 39.

anyone about the incident on the truck with the children. D.J. told Doc, that he had not. Doc follows up, “Didn’t they ask? Didn’t anyone ever wonder why you came home early?” D.J. tells Doctor that yes, people asked, but he always told them, “Nothing happened.”²⁰⁰ Fenn explains that psychological trauma of veterans “exacerbates the problems of reintegration with both his family and his culture; his experience overseas has altered his perceptions of his modified vision and not only inhibits his personal acceptance of the values of his society, but also makes him suspect in the eyes of its members with whom he must interact.”²⁰¹ The dual feeling of his own guilt paired with how people might respond to him causes D.J. to keep his experience and stories to himself.

Doctor says, “One day you’re in the jungle. These catastrophic things happen. Death, screaming, fire. Then suddenly you’re sitting in a jet airplane, going home.”²⁰² D.J. describes the plane ride home including the “stewardesses” on board and D.J. felt the desire to kill them, “I...wanted to throw a hand grenade right in the middle of all those teeth” because she was smiling at him.²⁰³ Doc wants to know what it was like for D.J. when he “touched ground” back in the U.S.

Doc. – Did they have a Victory Parade for you?

D.J. – *Victory Parade?!*

Doc. – Soldiers always used to get parades, when they came home. Made them feel better.

D.J. – Victory Parades! Man... (*laughs at the insane wonder of the idea*)

Doc. – You mean there wasn’t a band playing when you landed in the states?

D.J. – Man, let me tell you something—

Doc. – You didn’t march together, with your unit?

D.J. – Unit? What unit?

²⁰⁰ Cole, 33.

²⁰¹ Fenn, 216.

²⁰² Cole, 22.

²⁰³ Cole, 22.

Doc. – Well, the people you flew back with.

D.J. – I didn't know a soul in that plane, man! I didn't have no *unit*. Any unit I had, man, they're all burned to a crisp. How'm I supposed to march with that unit?—with a whiskbroom, pushing all these little back crumbs forward down the street, and everybody cheering, 'There's Willie! See that little black crumb is my son, Georgie! Hi, Georgie! Glad to have you home boy!'

Huh?...What are you talking about?! This wasn't World War Two, man, they sent us back one by one, when our number came up. I told you that!

Doc. – People were burned to crisp in World War Two.

D.J. – Yeah, well there was a difference, because I *heard* about that war! When people came back from that war they *felt* like somebody. They were made to feel *good*, at least for a while.²⁰⁴

Part of the dialogue in *Medal of Honor Rag* teeters on the edge between blatant preaching on behalf of Cole and questioning sarcasm from Doctor. This previous cutting from the play highlights this point. Surely, Doc knows that the veterans of Vietnam were not treated like those from World War II. Are these questions presented as a means to force D.J. to articulate those differences? Or are they an attempt, by Cole, to make sure the audience recognizes the difference? Given when the play was written, I would lean towards the latter, but this is one (among many) areas of interpretation. Individual productions can push it farther towards one or the other. Regardless of interpretation, the fact remains that Vietnam veterans were treated differently upon return to the U.S. than the veterans of World War II. The war was different and therefore the veterans were different. Polner writes, "Vietnam veterans are the children of the era of mass media and mass education, of unwinnable wars in a thermonuclear age, and of a disapproving climate at home; they cannot unquestioningly accept 'their war' in the way their fathers regarded the

²⁰⁴ Cole, 23.

fight against Germany and Japan in World War II.”²⁰⁵ Vietnam War veterans’ entrance and exit from the war differs from the World War II generation of veterans.

For the first time in the play, this section sheds light on the grotesque nature of war. War is inherently violent and therefore also bloody and messy. Here D.J. describes an imaginary conversation that involves him talking to dust, ashes, and bits of men from his unit. Doctor serves as devil’s advocate when he tells D.J., “People were burned to crisp in World War Two.”²⁰⁶ But immediately D.J. responds, again emphasizing one of the many differences between the two wars stating that when veterans returned from World War II, they felt like they were a part of something great. That they had contributed in a positive way. This point is generally accepted as truth—that veterans of World War II were proud of their service in way that Vietnam veterans were not—but it speaks to the difference between the consensus and collective. The majority of World War II veterans may have a generally positive experience having survived and won the war, but we cannot assume that is the case for all. In the same moment, we can assume that most Vietnam War veterans had a negative and traumatic experience in the war. This does not mean that all of them returned home full of anger and distrust of the government. I have spoken to veterans that, retrospectively, are appalled by their participation in Vietnam and others, though traumatized still have pride in their service regardless of their political feelings towards the war.

D.J. returned home and landed in Seattle. To make a connection, Doctor tells D.J. that he had a patient who was spat on at the Seattle airport. D.J. seems shocked

²⁰⁵ Polner, xiv.

²⁰⁶ Cole, 23.

by this information, which again makes me question Cole's intent. Did D.J. not know this happened (or allegedly happened) to some veterans or is Cole attempting to make it clear to the audience? Doctor explains the motivation for the spit, "For not winning the war. He said an American Legionnaire, with a red face, apparently used to wait right at the gate...so he could spit on soldiers coming back, the moment they arrived."²⁰⁷ This cultural image of Vietnam veterans being spit on has been argued as a myth. Jerry Lembcke wrote *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1988) to argue that the "spit" is an urban legend. This, of course, was written over a decade after Cole's play, but just as the helicopters from *Apocalypse Now* remains a part of the cultural memory of the war, so does the anecdote of veterans being spat on in airports. Doctor continues his point, "Then, inside the terminal there was a group of young people screaming insults. White kids, with long hair."²⁰⁸ Doctor expects D.J. to ask why they were screaming insults, but he does not so Doctor explains why, "For burning babies."²⁰⁹ Angrily, D.J. defends himself, "I didn't burn no babies! (*D.J. begins to pace. He is agitated. The DOCTOR watches, waits.*)"²¹⁰ Again, Cole is pointing to these commonly known (factual or fictional) responses to Vietnam veterans. The "burning babies" reference is most commonly tied to the image of the young Vietnamese girl, Phan Thj Kim Phúc, running naked on a road. She is nine years old in the picture and not a "baby." The two—the phrase and the image—are forever tangled together. We hear D.J.'s passion and anger at even the suggestion that he participated in such actions. He continues to tell his side

²⁰⁷ Cole, 24.

²⁰⁸ Cole, 24.

²⁰⁹ Cole, 24.

²¹⁰ Cole, 24.

of the story. “The day I arrived, like, everything was disorganized. There was a smaller plane took us to the nearest landing strip, know what I mean?—and then you had to hitch a ride, or whatever, to find your own unit. [...] Like, my first day over there. My *first day*, mind you! So, I hitched a ride on this truck. About six or seven guys in it, heading toward Danang.²¹¹ I was a F.N.G. [fucking new guy], so I kept my mouth shut. [...] They pick on you over there, they hate you for the simple fact that you never been through the miseries they been having.”²¹² *Medal of Honor Rag* and *Tracers* both reference the storytelling from soldiers who have been in country longer and the animosity they have for the F.N.G.’s. But despite the anger and resentment, D.J. describes the guys he worked with, especially those in this unit, as “family.”²¹³ As they are driving in the truck, they came across a group of children. The truck was forced to slow down to traverse around the children. The slow speed annoyed some of the men in the truck and one yelled, “Little fuckers!” at the kids.²¹⁴ In turn, some of the children gave the men the finger. D.J. found this to be funny, but many of the other men did not. “Suddenly the guys on the truck start screaming for the driver to back up. So he jams on the brakes, and in this big cloud of dust he’s grinding this thing in reverse as if he means to run those kinds down, backwards,” D.J. tells Doctor.²¹⁵ The kids take off running, laughing, and give the men the middle finger again. D.J. continues,

²¹¹ Danang, more commonly spelled Da Nang is a city on the coast of Vietnam. Da Nang is known for its beautiful beaches that were often full of soldiers during some points of the Vietnam War. It was also home to the Da Nang Air Base during the war.

²¹² Cole, 24-25.

²¹³ Cole, 25.

²¹⁴ Cole, 30.

²¹⁵ Cole, 31.

So, uh,...everybody on the truck opens fire. I mean, I couldn't believe it, they're like half a platoon, they've got M-16's automatic rifles, they're blasting away, it sounds like a pitched battle, they're pouring all this firepower into these kids. The kids are lying on the ground, they're dead about a hundred times over, and these guys are still firing round into the bodies, like they've gone crazy. And the kids' bodies are giving these little jumps into the air like rag dolls, and then they flop down again...²¹⁶

The men eventually stopped, but D.J. was in shock. "*My first day in the country, and we ain't even reached the Combat Zone!*"²¹⁷ D.J. describes the other soldiers as "a bunch of gunslingers, out of the Old West."²¹⁸ D.J. tells this story in parts, but at one point, as he continues the story, D.J. trails off as the stage directions read, "DALE JACKSON suddenly can't go on. He buries his face in his hands and is attacked by a terrible grief—ambushed by it."²¹⁹ Grief and its connection to guilt, is the part of D.J.'s PTSD that he struggles with the most.

Guilt is a significant element of trauma that many soldiers have battled after returning from war. Guilt for their actions, guilt for their participation in war on a variety of levels, guilt about leaving the military, and guilt in countless other forms of guilt. Jonathan Shay's book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) touches on the concept of guilt as being connected to combat trauma and that they emerge "in the wake of a closest friend's death in battle. Both slam a door on a happy homecoming for the survivor. Grief [...] can lead men to give up all desire to return home alive."²²⁰ D.J. is happy to have returned home alive, but

²¹⁶ Cole, 31.

²¹⁷ Cole, 31.

²¹⁸ Cole, 31.

²¹⁹ Cole, 25.

²²⁰ Shay, 73.

he is unable to shake the “it could have been me” or even “should have been me”

feeling he carries. In Fenn’s analysis of Cole’s play, he argues,

D.J.’s new cultural identity has become irretrievably linked with the very source of his guilt and anxiety, and the conflicting impulses generated within him are a source of constant frustration. Being the guest of honor at fundraising and recruiting affairs has raised him from obscurity into the limelight, but he is continually haunted by the ghosts of his comrades and the memory of his actions in Vietnam.²²¹

In one scene, Doc attempts to force D.J. to articulate the guilt he harbors. Doc says to him,

Is it the tank? Can you say it? Do you want me to say it? You don’t know why you are alive and they are dead. You think you should be dead, too. Sometimes you feel that you *are* really dead, already. You can’t feel anything because it’s too painful. You dream about the rifle that should have killed you, with the barrel right in your face. You don’t know why it didn’t kill you, why just that rifle should have misfired... And what about those orders that transferred you out of their tank? Why just that night? Why you? Why did the ambush come the next day? ... There must be something magical about this, like the AK-47 that misfired for no reason. Perhaps you made all these things happen, just to save yourself. Perhaps it is all your fault that your friends are dead. If you hadn’t been transferred from their tank, then somehow they wouldn’t have died. So you should die, too.

D.J. immediately reacts as Doctor ends his monologue, “I’m dead already!” Doc responds, “Yes. You *feel*, sometimes, that you are dead already. You would like to die, to shut your eyes quietly on all this, and you don’t know who you can tell about it. You keep it locked up like a terrible secret...This is our work, D.J. This is what we have to do.”²²² For D.J., and for Doc, the survivor’s guilt they feel is more than just a cliché, but a constant reality. Doc describes it as “the kind of thing that can make a

²²¹ Fenn, 215.

²²² Cole, 26-27.

man feel so bad that he wants to die.”²²³ As discussed earlier, suicide is something that D.J., at least in theory, has considered.

The concept of a “hero” is brought up several times throughout *Medal of Honor Rag*. We inherently associate the Medal of Honor with heroism. But do the people who have earned the medal have the same association? In one conversation D.J. tells Doc, “I became a big hero!” Doc agrees, “You became a big hero...You appear on TV. The head of General Motors²²⁴ shakes your hand. You get married. You re-enlist—re-enlist!—travel around the state making recruiting speeches. You get a new car, a house with a big mortgage. Everybody gives you credit...for a while.”²²⁵ Re-enlistment is not uncommon for veterans. It was uncommon for Vietnam veterans, but not totally unheard of. Myra MacPherson explains in *Long Time Passing*, the way veterans cope with coming home is connected to the way they entered. He writes,

There are, obviously, myriad factors involved in successful readjustment after Vietnam. They include: the degree of combat and extent of military preparedness, age at the time of combat, whether the veteran enlisted or was drafted, sense of justification in the cause, degree of support for family and friends, personality characteristics, coping skills, antiwar sentiment in their return environment.²²⁶

And depending upon how they entered and their experience while serving, some volunteer to go back or at least re-enlist, like D.J. Heroism can lead not only to survivor’s guilt, but propel one even deeper into PTSD. There are several varying symptoms of PTSD including loss of control over mental functions (including

²²³ Cole, 27.

²²⁴ The head of General Motors in 1968 was Ed Cole.

²²⁵ Cole, 42.

²²⁶ MacPherson, 281.

memory and the ability to trust), a feeling of constant danger and threat, activation of combat skills in post-war life, even alcohol and drug use. Any of these can lead to depression and feelings of isolation and meaninglessness.²²⁷ Doctor tells D.J., “That the medal can make a man sick—drive him into a hospital.” D.J. is quick to point out that the “whole thing makes a man sick!” And the medal is not always the cause, D.J. continues,

There’s a lot of sick vets who didn’t get no Medal of Honor. And they’re mainlining and getting beat up in the streets and sucking on the gin bottle, and they didn’t get no Bronze Star, no nothing except maybe a Purple Heart and a ‘*less than honorable discharge*’—bad paper, man, you can’t get a job, you can’t get benefits, you can’t get nothing if you got bad paper. Now you tell me, what does my medal have to do with *that*?²²⁸

This is an obviously factual statement as “Such unhealed PTSD can devastate life and incapacitate its victims from participation in the domestic, economic, and political life of the nation. The painful paradox is that fighting for one’s country can render one unfit to be its citizen.”²²⁹ Regardless of having received a medal, the effects of war stay with veterans. D.J.’s depression and anxiety are connected to the medal, but it is not the only factor attributing to his current state.

Nightmares are another accompanying characteristic of PTSD. D.J.’s file notes that he has stomach pains and nightmares. Doctor reads from the file describing the nightmare, “An anonymous soldier standing in front of him, the barrel of his AK-47 as big as a railroad tunnel, his finger on the trigger slowly pressing it.”²³⁰ The doctor asks about the “anonymous soldier” and D.J. explains that it is “the dude who should

²²⁷ Shay, xx.

²²⁸ Cole, 45.

²²⁹ Shay, xx.

²³⁰ Cole, 13.

have killed me.”²³¹ D.J. goes on to say that the man’s gun misfired and had it not, D.J. would have been killed. But instead, D.J. beat him to death with the butt of his gun. His need for survival, his frustration and his anger, explode from within.

D.J.’s anger is heard in his lines and is read in the stage directions. His anger is unpredictable. One stage direction highlights this explosive quality of D.J., “DALE JACKSON can’t control his rage and frustration any longer. He blows up, grabs his chair—as the only object available—and swings it above his head as a weapon. [...] After he has torn up the room, D.J. stands, exhausted, confused, emptyhanded [sic].”²³² Doctor asks D.J., “Are you all right? How did you feel about being a killer?” and D.J. responds, “*I didn’t kill those kids, man!*”²³³ Kali Tal’s chapter—“Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma”—from Philip Jason’s edited collection, *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* argues that literature written about trauma by those who survived it is qualitatively different than literature about trauma written by others. Tal recognizes that “Survivor narratives are linked across topic lines; narratives by those personally uninvolved with the trauma are not. This distinction connects literature by Vietnam veterans to Holocaust literature, A-bomb literature, the literature of combat veterans of other wars, rape literature, and incest literature.”²³⁴ According to Tal, the differences are marked by three factors: the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community.²³⁵ *Medal of Honor Rag*

²³¹ Cole, 13.

²³² Cole, 32-33.

²³³ Cole, 33

²³⁴ Jason, 217.

²³⁵ Jason, 217-218.

was not written by a man who served in the Vietnam War, but it is *about* a real veteran. Perhaps it is after Dwight Johnson's death that Cole attempts to find a community for Johnson that he did not have in life. The lack of community contributed to the anger, guilt, and grief in the life of D.J. and more importantly, the life of Dwight Johnson.

The last conversation between Doctor and D.J. is somewhat a summary of what the play has already addressed as well as a brief glimpse into the future, while simultaneously re-visiting the issue of race. I discussed the double meaning or confusion about "throwing it in their faces" and how the "it" here is representative of the medal. And just before this mention of veterans on the steps of the capital, Doc tells D.J. that perhaps he does not need the medal anymore and he reminds D.J. of their previous conversation. Doc tells D.J., "You see, part of you already wants to throw it away, while—" D.J. stops him, "Throw it away?! You're the one who's crazy. You know what I'd be without that medal? I'd be just another invisible Nigger, waiting on line and getting shit on just for being there! I *told* you about that, man! You just don't *listen*!"²³⁶ Doctor says to him, "...once again, in Detroit, you have been singled out from all the others."²³⁷ In this way, Doc is comparing the Vietnam War to life in Detroit. In *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* David and Crane write, "The black soldier has always carried on a two-front war. The first has been against America's common enemy and the second against the racism of his

²³⁶ Cole, 44.

²³⁷ Cole, 44.

own country.”²³⁸ In Vietnam, he was singled out because he survived; now back in Detroit he is singled out as a hero.

Doctor is telling D.J. about the veterans, heroes, “In wheelchairs, some of them; on crutches? At the Capitol steps? Washington? Throwing their medals away? A kind of miracle-scene, like the old—”²³⁹ D.J. interrupts him to refocus the Doctor’s lens through which he looks at those television reports,

Doc, those dudes on TV are all white. [...] But a lot of folks don’t want the black veteran to throw down *his* weapons so soon. Know what I mean? Like, we are supposed to be preparing ourselves for another war, right back here. Vietnam was just our basic training, see? I’m telling this to both of you [the guard is in the room at this point], y’see, so you won’t be too surprised when it comes.²⁴⁰

Doc asks D.J. why he is saying this and D.J. answers, “I want you to have something to think about, for the next session. Give us a good starting point... [...] Don’t you worry, Doc. I’ll be seeing you. You just sit down now, and write your notes in the folder.”²⁴¹ That is D.J.’s final line of the play.

The play ends with D.J.’s (and Johnson’s death) told via direct address from Doc. Doc tells the audience that two days later, he returned for his next session with D.J., but that D.J. did not appear. D.J. went A.W.O.L. again, back in Detroit. The rest of the information provided by Doc is a theatrical telling of what happened to Dwight Johnson. Johnson’s wife, Katrina May, was in the hospital following a minor surgery, that they could not afford. Doc says, that had D.J. tried to contact people in Detroit there would have been many willing to help. People “who would not have allowed a

²³⁸ David, 11.

²³⁹ Cole, 46.

²⁴⁰ Cole, 47.

²⁴¹ Cole, 47.

Medal of Honor winner to sink into scandalous debt.”²⁴² But he chose a different path. As his wife worried and stressed over the hospital bill on the evening of April 30, D.J. told his wife that he “would come back to the hospital that night with a check, and also with her hair curlers and bathrobe. As he was leaving, he said, ‘Ain’t you going to give me a kiss good-bye?’ And he put his thumb in his mouth like a little boy, which made her laugh.”²⁴³ D.J. then found a ride with friends and had them take him to a white part of town. He walked into a grocery store, with a gun in hand and announced that he was going to rob the store. D.J./Dwight never fired the gun, but at point-blank range, the manager of the grocery store “emptied his own gun [...] into D.J.’s body.”²⁴⁴ David and Crane reproduce Jon Nordheimer’s 1971 article, “From Dakto to Detroit: Death of a Troubled Hero,” which states,

Ordinarily the case would have been closed right there, a routine crime in a city where there were 13,583 armed robberies last year [meaning 1970]. But when the detectives went through the dead man’s wallet for identification, they found a small white card with its edges rubbed thin from wear. “Congressional Medal of Honor Society—United States of America,” it said. “This certifies that Dwight H. Johnson is a member of this society.”²⁴⁵

A few hours later, at Detroit General Hospital, D.J./Dwight died from the wounds of five gunshots. His body was flown to Arlington National Cemetery. There he was a given a traditional military burial that any Medal of Honor recipient would earn. Regarding his funeral, “Some 400 attended his funeral in Detroit. Most were black; the few white faces that appeared were army buddies who had learned of the

²⁴² Cole, 48.

²⁴³ Cole, 48.

²⁴⁴ Cole, 49.

²⁴⁵ David, 229. This is quoting from *New York Times* article entitled, “From Dakto to Detroit: Death of a Troubled Hero” written by Jon Nordheimer on May 25, 1971. This is the only publication of this article that I could find, I could not locate the original.

tragedy from the evening news. Some mourners were complete strangers. Everyone, the reporters, the friends, the public, tried to make sense of what had just happened.”²⁴⁶ Doc ends his monologue,

I wrote to his mother about him, about what a remarkable human being even I could see he was, in only sixty minutes with him. She wrote back: “Sometimes I wonder if Dale tired of this life and needed someone else to pull the trigger.” In her living room she keeps a large color photograph of him, in uniform, with the Congressional Medal of Honor around his neck.²⁴⁷

The end of the play sums up Dwight Johnson’s life as a Medal of Honor winner. Even in his mother’s house, the photo that she keeps of Johnson is one of him in uniform and wearing the medal. Not Johnson as a child or a wedding photo, only him in uniform.

Past Productions

Medal of Honor Rag was first performed on April 14, 1975 by the Theatre Company of Boston and the Fund for Theater and Film, at the New Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It debuted in New York at Theatre de Lys on March 28, 1976. Later that same year, it was produced at the Zellerbach Theatre in Philadelphia, in association with the Annenberg Center (University of Pennsylvania) on September 29, 1976.²⁴⁸ It was not until 1977 that the script was published. A few years later, it was picked up for a PBS special under the larger project of “American Playhouse.” “American Playhouse” was a series on PBS that aired theatre productions including *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *True West*, *Into the Woods*, and many

²⁴⁶ Mikaelian, 254.

²⁴⁷ Cole, 48-49. The quote from his Mother is also a real quote from Dwight Johnson’s, except she used his nickname, Skip.

²⁴⁸ Cole, 3.

more. The series ran from 1982-1993. *Medal of Honor Rag* was produced by Joyce Chopra and directed by Lloyd Richards; it premiered on April 6, 1982.²⁴⁹ Damien Leake played D.J. and Hector Elizondo played Doctor. Reviews of the “American Playhouse” production of *Medal of Honor Rag* speak positively of it saying that the director, Richards, “has refused to indulge in a single moment of emotional pyrotechnics. He uses enormous restraint to heighten the intensity of the situation.”²⁵⁰ From there the play has been produced numerous times from Pittsburgh Public Theatre in 1978 to Oberlin College in 1983 to St. Louis Actors’ Studio in 2009 to an upcoming production in Providence, Rhode Island in May 2016.²⁵¹

In April 2015, I communicated via email with the St. Louis Actors’ Studio director, David Wassilak.²⁵² At the time, Wassilak was the Associate Artist Director of St. Louis Actors’ Studio and that years theme was “Power and Politics.” Wassilak was the one who suggested *Medal of Honor Rag* to be considered and since he promoted it, he was assigned to direct it. Wassilak was born in 1961, so he only has vague memories of the war so “most of my experience is in retrospect through music, and movies, and other popular culture. It certainly wasn’t taught or discussed when I was in school.”²⁵³ I asked him why he was drawn to Cole’s play and he answered, “I always try to make a personal connection to the plays I’m directing.

²⁴⁹ Cole, 3.

²⁵⁰ O’Connor, John J. “TV: ‘Medal of Honor Rag’ a Veteran’s Problems.” 6 April 1982. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/06/arts/tv-medal-of-honor-rag-a-veteran-s-problems.html>

²⁵¹ See Figure 18 and Figure 19.

²⁵² See Figure 20.

²⁵³ David Wassilak, email with Amanda Boyle, April 2015.

And given my anti-war stance and liberal views, it probably had an influence on my production.”²⁵⁴ When I asked how the audience responded to the play, Wassilak told me that the response was “kind, but not overwhelming.”²⁵⁵ He remembers it not being a big seller at the box office, but those that attended were moved by it. He wrote, “It seems we still don’t want to deal with experiences like what D.J. went through or the Vietnam War in general. Just as when it was happening, the subject tends to get ignored.”²⁵⁶ A review from the *Riverfront Times* states, “St. Louis Actors’ Studio is to be commended, first for resurrecting the little-seen play, and then for presenting it so impressively.”²⁵⁷ Critic, Dennis Brown, ends his review, “It’s precisely because plays do not change the world that all these decades and so many wars later *Medal of Honor Rag* still provides so relevant and involving an experience.”²⁵⁸ Often reviews of Vietnam War plays, especially those reviews of more recent productions touch on the relevance of how the play can and does speak to contemporary audiences.

On March 28, 2016, I spoke with the director of the May 2016 production, D. Adriane Spunt. Spunt is thrilled to be directing *Medal of Honor Rag*, for the second time. When Spunt was in high school, she had a best friend whose mother worked with Tom Cole, as a professor. There was a workshop production of the play in 1972, when Spunt was just sixteen years old. The workshop production was looking

²⁵⁴ David Wassilak.

²⁵⁵ David Wassilak.

²⁵⁶ David Wassilak.

²⁵⁷ Brown, Dennis. “Good Citations: The venerable *Medal of Honor Rag* deserves an oak leaf cluster.” *Riverfront Times*. 4 Feb. 2009.

<http://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/good-citations-the-venerable-medal-of-honor-rag-deserves-an-oak-leaf-cluster/Content?oid=2453367>

²⁵⁸ Brown.

for ushers so Spunt volunteered, “I must have seen the play ten times.”²⁵⁹ She loved the simplicity and honesty of the story, so much so that she directed it while working on her MA in Theatre Education from Emerson College in Boston, MA. Spunt told me, “Vietnam veterans were kind of like the forgotten veterans. It was such an unpopular war. To actually hear the words of somebody who had been there...people didn’t understand PTSD.”²⁶⁰ The play is very much about the Vietnam veteran and also a juxtaposition between the black veteran (D.J.) and the Jewish veteran (Doc) as well as the Vietnam veteran and the World War II veteran. This second time around for Spunt is inspiring her again, to find new and different things than she found before. She explained that for her, the play was very topical in the 1970s, but it also has “eternal themes. What does it mean to be a patriot? What does it mean to go to war? What are the ethics of war? Vietnam was my generations Iraq. What the hell were we doing there in the first place?”²⁶¹ The tragedy of the play, that Spunt articulated, is that D.J. goes to war, bonds with his unit, and then he is hit by an uncontrollable rage and kills everyone in his path. This action violates everything he believes in and for that, he is awarded the highest military honor.²⁶² With her upcoming production, Spunt hopes to “make people uncomfortable with the idea of war. I want people to question their own beliefs. And I want people to remember Dwight Johnson.”²⁶³ Her production is dedicated to the Black Lives Matter

²⁵⁹ D. Adriane Spunt, interview by Amanda Boyle, March 28, 2016, telephone interview.

²⁶⁰ D. Adriane Spunt.

²⁶¹ D. Adriane Spunt.

²⁶² D. Adriane Spunt.

²⁶³ D. Adriane Spunt.

movement. Spunt said, "Politics don't change anything, its when the people's hearts change that we see change. If we change, the policies will change."²⁶⁴

Conclusion

Medal of Honor Rag is stuck in a place and a time and is a reflection of a specific fictionalized, but historical, event about a particular individual. But that does not keep it from getting produced again and again. James Reston, Jr., editor of *Coming to Terms: American Plays and the Vietnam War* notes that the play explores the "relationship between madness and bravery and the hypocrisy of official honor" and that Cole's *Medal of Honor Rag* "will give you a powerful point of view for the next time the Pentagon hands out 8,000 medals."²⁶⁵

Fenn's analysis of Vietnam War plays includes three categories, one of which is "rites of reintegration," where *Medal of Honor Rag* is placed.²⁶⁶ Fenn explains "rites of reintegration," as plays that address "The problems inherent in the psychological readjustment of both the war veteran and his society comprise the dramatic conflict of virtually all of the homecoming plays."²⁶⁷ This play is as much about D.J.'s war experiences as it is about his reintegration into society. The play grapples with countless issues that veterans, especially Vietnam veterans, struggle with. One unique issue to *Medal of Honor Rag* is D.J.'s race. There have been other plays that investigate black Vietnam veterans such as David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976) and Adrienne Kennedy's *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1973). In *The Black*

²⁶⁴ D. Adriane Spunt.

²⁶⁵ Reston, James, Jr. Ed. *Coming to Terms: American Plays and the Vietnam War*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1985, xi.

²⁶⁶ Fenn, 138.

²⁶⁷ Fenn, 199.

Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam, David and Crane write, “Ironically, although blacks are now freely accepted into the American armed forces, they are the victims of a far greater discrimination than ever before practiced.”²⁶⁸ The article goes on to report that in 1966 there were 22,000 black soldiers in Vietnam, which was almost 15% of the total United States military population in Vietnam at the time. In the same year, 22% all army troops killed in action were black, showing that a greater number of blacks than whites were being sent to combat and danger zones.²⁶⁹ Beidler, in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, describes the experience of Vietnam as a “self-contained world” and a “complete system.”²⁷⁰ This is not an argument of which war is the worst, but instead an attempt to show the severity of this war, especially through the eyes of the veterans who lived through it. Dwight Johnson’s “self-contained world” led to his PTSD, mental instability, and irrational actions, which in turn led to his death.

²⁶⁸ David, 13-14.

²⁶⁹ David, 14.

²⁷⁰ Beidler, xiv.

Chapter 2: *Still Life* by Emily Mann

The war split our family apart and the war split me apart.

—David Savran quoting Emily Mann, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*

Emily Mann's *Still Life* is arguably the most popular (or at least most well-known) of the three plays included in this project. It has been produced hundreds of times across the country and—after David Rabe's plays—it is the first play people mention to me when I say that I am studying Vietnam War plays. The language in *Still Life* was not carefully crafted by Mann, but instead it is the language of three people who lived through the war: a soldier, his wife, and his mistress. A story about the Vietnam War is almost always going to put a man—the soldier—at the forefront. But the challenge of Mann's play is to also look at and listen to the women. The female voices on stage are a large part of the story Mann wanted to tell. Therefore much of my dramaturgical work for *Still Life* focuses on just that: the story Mann wanted to tell. I spend somewhat less time on textual analysis than I did with *Medal of Honor Rag* and more on Mann and her experience creating this play. This play is also the strongest example (of the three plays examines here) of how the veteran is simultaneously the archive and repertoire. In addition to wounding, coming home, and commemorating, the themes in this play include masculinity, women and war, sex and violence, and more. This chapter includes sections on Mann (focusing on my interview with her), the three people represented in the play, textual analysis (of the themes I have mentioned here), and past productions and audience reception of *Still Life*. My dramaturgical approach for Mann's play is connected to Mann's process of creation.

Emily Mann: Women and the War

Emily Mann was born in 1952 and as a child she studied music: piano, flute, and recorder.²⁷¹ It was her dream to become a musician. She applied her musical skills to her writing, "I'm very aware of the music and rhythmic structure as I'm writing; it's not just instinct."²⁷² In an interview in 1987, Mann told scholar David Savran, that although she loved theatre as a child, it "never occurred to me as something you actually did, as a serious person in the world [laughs]."²⁷³ Like many theatre professionals, Mann got involved in high school theatre, which changed her trajectory. In her high school years, Mann became politically active and protested against the war in Vietnam. Mann went on to study directing at Harvard University (Radcliffe College), then the University of Minnesota. Through her studies at Minnesota, she was awarded a directing fellowship at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. During her tenure at the Guthrie, Mann wrote and directed her first play *Annula, An Autobiography* (1977/1985). Even with her first play, her career in the theatre began to take shape. *Annula* is a documentary play based on an interview with and about Holocaust survivors. Just a few years later, Mann wrote (and directed) her second documentary play, *Still Life* (1980). Since then, she has written several other plays, mostly in the documentary genre, though as I mentioned previously Mann personally prefers the term "theatre of testimony" or

²⁷¹ Savran, David. "Emily Mann." *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. New York: TCG, 1988, 145.

²⁷² Bestko, Kathleen and Rachel Koeing. "Emily Mann." *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Breech Tree Books, 1987, 275.

²⁷³ Savran, "Emily Mann," 148.

“testimonial plays.”²⁷⁴ Mann has won Obie Awards, Peabody Awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and she was nominated for a Tony Award, along with many other accomplishments. Mann is currently in her 25th season as the Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre, a professional theatre company on the campus of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey.

I had the opportunity to speak with and interview Mann on June 1, 2015. I emailed her assistant to set up an interview in March 2015 and the earliest we could schedule a phone interview was June 2015—Mann is a busy woman who takes her career in the theatre seriously. My first question for Mann was, “What inspired you to write a play dealing with this particular topic—the Vietnam War and Vietnam veterans?” At first her answer was simple, “*It came to me*,” meaning she did not seek it, but it sought her.²⁷⁵ She had just finished writing *Annula* and she said that she gave so much, emotionally, to that project that she was not sure if she was ready to deal with the Vietnam War. Mann had a friend who later became the character [Nadine] (the mistress), who said, “I want you to meet my ‘friend,’ she didn’t tell me they were more than friends at the time. But I wasn’t sure...[she paused] it was a wounding war.”²⁷⁶ [Nadine] convinced Mann to meet her friend who became the basis for [Mark] (the Marine Vietnam veteran) and explained, “But I met him. He sat there, in a monotone voice, telling me horrible, horrible, horrible things. I told him he needed to go to a VFW. I didn’t think I could help him.”²⁷⁷ [Mark] then said to Mann, “Then meet my wife she’s the real casualty of the war,” which later becomes a

²⁷⁴ Dawson, xiv.

²⁷⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Amanda Boyle, June 1, 2015, telephone interview.

²⁷⁶ Emily Mann.

²⁷⁷ Emily Mann.

line in the play.²⁷⁸ Mann told Savran that when she left the room she was, “shell-shocked. He just wanted to talk. All I said was, ‘And then what happened?’”²⁷⁹ Mann met [Mark’s] wife, [Cheryl], who recognized the importance of their story. [Cheryl] told Mann that she was afraid for her life and yet, [Nadine] said she had never met a “gentler man.”²⁸⁰ This intrigued Mann, but she still was not sure if she could write about Vietnam. Between all that she had given, emotionally, to *Annulla*, her stance on the war, and her relationship with her family because of her political ideologies—it seemed like too much to conquer. Mann also told me, “My father was for the war and I was very much against the war. It was an explosive and painful time.”²⁸¹ But after she met [Cheryl], she knew she needed to and wanted to tell their story. The first words from [Cheryl’s] mouth after [Mark] left the room became her first words in the play, “If I thought about this too much, I’d go crazy, so I don’t think about it much. I’m not too good with the past.”²⁸² Mann and the rest of country struggled (and still struggle) with the past as well. But it was the women—[Cheryl] and [Nadine]—that made the play work for Mann.

Mann continued to explain the importance of the role of the women in the play, but also in the world. “When I wrote *Still Life* in the late 70s domestic abuse may have been the number one killer of women. Explains a lot. If you don’t own your stuff, you are going to keep on doing what you are doing. Huge parts of American culture that crosses ethnic, racial, and class lines. Violence against

²⁷⁸ Emily Mann.

²⁷⁹ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 153.

²⁸⁰ Emily Mann.

²⁸¹ Emily Mann.

²⁸² Mann, Emily. *Still Life*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1982, 9. Savran, “Emily Mann,” 154.

women...it's a clear indicator of going to war."²⁸³ She met with [Mark], [Cheryl], and [Nadine], for over nine months, which equaled about 140 hours of recorded conversations.²⁸⁴ Mann felt an obligation to them, "They'd given me their story and it was important to tell it."²⁸⁵ It is the telling of the stories, of their stories, of her (Mann's) story, and the stories of the veterans that gives weight to this time in history. For Mann, the play was also an attempt to communicate with her father. She said to me, "It was an opportunity for me to answer my father through truly real people. I was able to show, from a vet's point of view, why the war was *wrong*. The words were his [Mark's]. *His* words about *his* experience."²⁸⁶ This was not a story or experience told through the filter of a newspaper writer or broadcast journalist, but instead it was told through the filter of a playwright—Mann. "It was very personal to me and to the characters. But we [Mann and her father] did make peace over that. We agreed to disagree."²⁸⁷ In almost all interviews with Mann that discuss *Still Life*, she describes the profound impact of her relationship with her father and the motivation to write this play. I found have this to be a fairly common story—a daughter responding to or connecting to the war via her father. Tracy Droz Tragos created (wrote, directed, and produced) a documentary film, *Be Good, Smile Pretty* (2003), which follows her search to find out more about her father and how he died

²⁸³ Emily Mann.

²⁸⁴ Savran, "Emily Mann," 154.

²⁸⁵ Savran, "Emily Mann," 154.

²⁸⁶ Emily Mann. Mann's emphasis in italics.

²⁸⁷ Emily Mann.

in the Vietnam War when she was only three months old.²⁸⁸ This kind of investigation is vital to the storytelling of veterans and the war.

Before continuing it is important to note the importance of Mann's role in documentary theatre as a genre. Gary Fisher Dawson's *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (1999) outlines several "movements" or "waves" of documentary theatre. The first recorded instance of documentary theatre, according to Dawson, is credited to John Reed's play *The Paterson Pageant* (1913).²⁸⁹ But the first period of development, Dawson cites, came later with the Weimar theatre in Germany in the 1920s. The second movement appeared with the creation of the Federal Theatre Project and the Living Newspapers in the United States in the 1930s. Edwin Piscator's direction of Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, in 1963, created the third wave of documentary theatre.²⁹⁰ Dawson posits a fourth period that was ushered in by Mann and describes her as the "chief principal architect" for the advancement of documentary theatre.²⁹¹ He argues that it is *her* plays that focused the attention on this particular form of theatre in the late 1970s, early 1980s, and mid-1990s. *Still Life* became and continues to be an exemplified sample of dramatized oral history. The story of *Still Life* came to Mann, she did not seek it out, but she does cite making the choice to re-deliver the story in the documentary format. "I chose the documentary style to insure that the reality of the people and events described could not be denied.

²⁸⁸ *Be Good, Smile Pretty*. Directed, Written, and Produced by Tracy Droz Tragos. New Video Group, Inc. 2003. DVD.

²⁸⁹ Dawson, xi.

²⁹⁰ Dawson, 9.

²⁹¹ Dawson, 9.

Perhaps one could argue about the accuracy of the people's interpretations of events, but one cannot deny that these are actual people describing actual events as they saw and understood them."²⁹² This point will remain vital throughout this examination of *Still Life*. Although documentary theatre is not new there is continual confusion of the form, as Dawson notes, "The forgoing arguments, facts, and experiences give me reason to believe that the absence of awareness, or the presence of confusion, surrounding documentary theatre in the United States, a difficult art, is the result of, more than anything else, a lack of information."²⁹³ This is perhaps why early (and even recent) reviews of productions of *Still Life* grapple with the form and concept of the play, as I will discuss later. Mann developed her "style" of documentary theatre after learning from Barney Simon, the late South African documentary theatre practitioner, which distinguishes her approach to the form from others.²⁹⁴ She builds her plays on oral histories (testimonies) and these stories allow her to stand on a soapbox to speak to concerns she has with certain political and social issues, such as the Vietnam War.

One of the main qualities of documentary theatre is the utilization of primary sources; taking the words of someone and using them to thematically or structurally tell a story. I asked Mann how she went about shaping the characters out of their own words. She replied, "I don't know," she laughed, "I could give you a bullshit answer, but I really don't know. I just went with what my gut told me."²⁹⁵ That is a mark of a great storyteller—putting pieces together until they fit—and Mann has a

²⁹² Reston, Jr., 255.

²⁹³ Dawson, 161.

²⁹⁴ Dawson, 164.

²⁹⁵ Emily Mann.

long tradition of telling stories. Due to the nature of the interviews that took place mostly individually, Mann could not use dialogue in the same way that many plays do. In a previous interview Mann was asked, “At what point, during the creation of *Still Life*, did you realize that you were not using standard dialogue?” She answered, “When I realized that the dialogue I’d written, which I’d liked by itself, didn’t have the muscle I wanted. It became a way to get information across, and the play began to seem like educational theater. The piece seems very leaden; it didn’t have any poetry, it didn’t have any drive or electricity or tension in it. And it didn’t have the traumatic element.”²⁹⁶ It originally began as a series of monologues, which gave it that “educational” or lecture-like feel—monologue from Mark, monologue from Cheryl, monologue from Nadine, etc. It was her husband (at the time), Gerry Bamman, who handed her scissors and suggested that the pieces should be closer together.²⁹⁷ It was Mann’s obsession with story and what she believed needed to be told that then gave way to the form.²⁹⁸ She took what she had, pages of monologues, and began to cut them apart and reassemble them in different patterns. She took the pieces of monologues and gave them a new orchestration. What resulted are the stories of three people told side-by-side, whose stories rarely (only twice) come together. The story is told as if the three people are in entirely different locations—unable to hear or respond to one another. Savran explains that Mann creates “dramatic portraits” of the characters “structuring documentary material by

²⁹⁶ Bestko, 275.

²⁹⁷ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 154.

²⁹⁸ Bestko, 275.

subjecting it to ironic juxtaposition.”²⁹⁹ Through this technique, Mann is able to create a juxtaposition of the stories against one another—where they come together and where they come apart. Savran observes that this approach to storytelling “forces the spectator to confront his or her own attitudes and beliefs and, without offering a facile solution, encourages reevaluation of deeply troubling issues.”³⁰⁰

Mann describes the power of performance, “it enables you to add another layer of perception to what you are presenting and gives you alternative ways to tell your story. [...] The play can then be seen from different angles simultaneously.”³⁰¹ As a reader or audience member, you have no choice but to hear each character’s story—their reality—and their versions of past events. As each character speaks, you are able to live in that character’s world momentarily until the next character speaks. I found this to be true when I directed a staged reading of *Still Life* in spring 2015 at the University of Kansas.³⁰² I found the presentation style to be the most challenging part of the process for myself and for the actors. There is such little interaction between the characters that the actors perform almost entirely in monologue form. She has also expressed that she learns a lot about the human experience from listening and therefore direct address seems natural in the theatre, to Mann. This makes Mann a powerful storyteller; her ability to listen and truly hear what is being said and to take that information and craft it into a new narrative as she said, “It is an extension of listening: I hear the stories. Hearing is very powerful

²⁹⁹ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 146.

³⁰⁰ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 146.

³⁰¹ Bestko, 275.

³⁰² See Figure 21.

for me.”³⁰³ In the field of traumatic studies, Cathy Caruth explains the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories so that the stories do “not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike.”³⁰⁴ Avoiding clichés may not have been altogether possible for Mann in writing *Still Life* as the words are not her own. Mann explained, “I think what gives you perspective in *Still Life* is that rigorous form, the limitation of the actors not being able to look at each other except where specified. Having to keep it going, except where the pauses occur.”³⁰⁵ Direct address also creates a space between the actors, which can be positive or negative. Perhaps it does not allow for tension to build or it never allows the tension to break. The moments where the characters do connect are then pointed out. Mann noted, “When I direct my own work, I try to stay open. If something’s not working, I’ll try to fix it. I like that I don’t have to go through anyone else before I make changes in the script; I can just rewrite it. As the director I try to look objectively at the play. I don’t try to wear two hats at the same time.”³⁰⁶ As a director, Mann knows the power and effect of direct address and it became clear that was the direction she wanted to take with *Still Life*.³⁰⁷ Direct address also serves as a technique for Mann—a means for accusation. “And because the audience is repeatedly and directly told we are all implicated in the Vietnam War, we have a fourth ‘voice’ added to this polyphonic

³⁰³ Bestko, 281.

³⁰⁴ Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, vii.

³⁰⁵ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 155.

³⁰⁶ Bestko, 280.

³⁰⁷ Bestko, 276.

collage of colliding traumatic memories of the sixties and seventies and explorations of an untenable present.”³⁰⁸ We, as an audience, are presented with the reality of [Mark’s] story. It is not the reality of all veterans, but it is [Mark’s] reality.

A powerful element of *Still Life* is how it shows this particular veteran, [Mark], and how he deals with and responds to trauma. This is not a full exploration of trauma or trauma studies, but it is important to note the significant role trauma plays in the study of the Vietnam War, it’s veterans, and the plays examined here. I do use and reference several studies of trauma including Professor of English at Emory College Patricia A. Cahill’s *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage* (2008), Cathy Caruth’s (professor at Cornell) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994). Cahill specifically examines the performance of trauma and “the complexities of a historical moment when martial performances might, at the very same time, suggest both ordered rule of war and the unruliness of trauma.”³⁰⁹ She shows how history, war, trauma, and the performance of all three are tightly interwoven. Caruth focuses on the relationship between trauma and memory and how one impacts the other and how “trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication, in therapy, in the classroom, and in literature, as well as in psychoanalytic

³⁰⁸ Jason, 77.

³⁰⁹ Cahill, Patricia A. *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2.

theory.”³¹⁰ I will continue to site these sources, when appropriate, throughout this examination of *Still Life*.

Each author, and many others, provides different approaches to trauma and specifically trauma connected to the war in Vietnam. The reality is that “the technique of telling stories in popular culture and of generating a social mythology about a traumatic war is very much the same” as it has always been.³¹¹ Past-Professor of History James Oliver Robertson’s *American Myth, American Reality* (1980) examines the creation and proliferation of American myth and that the inherent storytelling of traumatic war (as though there non-traumatic wars) goes back to the ancient Greece and the telling of the Trojan War, if not even earlier. Robertson suggests that storytellers in ancient Greece used war stories as a form of entertainment, especially when told by a veteran of that war therefore they were able to “purge” and “heal.”³¹² Central to psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay’s argument (in his comparison of Vietnam War stories to Homer’s *Iliad*) is that we must understand the “specific nature of catastrophic war experience not only causes lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms but can *ruin* good character.”³¹³ This argument can be seen in characters examined in these plays, including Mark in *Still Life*. Marita Sturken also writes in her book *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, that those who survive traumatic historical events, such as the Vietnam War, are “powerful cultural figures. They are awarded moral authority,

³¹⁰ Caruth, 4.

³¹¹ Robertson, James Oliver. *American Myth, American Reality*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1980, 5.

³¹² Robertson, 5.

³¹³ Shay, xiii.

and their experience carries the weight of cultural value. This does not mean that all such survivors are treated as figures of cultural importance. *Survivors of historical events are often represented as figures of wisdom in popular culture while ignored in person.*"³¹⁴ In theory, in film and literature, we hold the veteran to be something of a monolith, but in reality, the true stories of veterans are often hidden.

In an interview, Mann explained that a brain specialist once pointed out a relationship between traumatic memory and Mann's structure of *Still Life*. The form of *Still Life*, with its juxtaposition of characters and stories "reminded her [the brain specialist] of the way the brain works when you are remembering traumatic events, but also, the play itself seemed to her to be *my* traumatic memory of hearing their stories during the interview sessions."³¹⁵ This again connects to the idea of listening as a form of healing and Mann's reiteration of the interviews was, perhaps, her own form of healing or her process of dealing with the trauma communicated from [Mark], [Cheryl], and [Nadine]. Mann confesses, "the play as a whole is my traumatic memory of their accounts."³¹⁶ Mann connected this idea—hearing and retelling trauma—in part to her (Mann) being a woman. Culturally and historically women often sit with other women and talk. As Mann explained, "Women sit around and talk to each other about their memories of traumatic, devastating events in their lives."³¹⁷ I would argue that this is also true for men, but perhaps men and women tell stories differently.

³¹⁴ Sturken, 255. Emphasis in italics are mine.

³¹⁵ Bestko, 281.

³¹⁶ Reston, Jr., 255.

³¹⁷ Bestko, 281.

Mann finds a certain connection with the material as she creates her plays. When Mann then puts these stories on stage “the audience experiences a direct interaction which is in the moment.”³¹⁸ Perhaps that moment is created through Mann’s structure. Struken explains,

Memory forms the fabric of human life, affecting everything from the ability to perform simple, everyday tasks to the recognition of the self. Memory establishes life’s continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity.³¹⁹

Individual moments can lead to a traumatic experience, like [Mark’s] experience in war and Mann’s experience of hearing history. Caruth notes that Freud tried to explain the experience of war trauma by investigating the relationship between trauma and survival, which are inherently tied together. The “fact that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*.”³²⁰ [Mark’s] status as a veteran is its own form of trauma. It is possible that Mann did not realize or recognize the full impact of not only interviewing these people, but also the impact of living with their words for so long. But she did share in one interview with Leigh Buchanan Bienen, a criminal defense attorney and Senior Lecturer at Northwestern University School of Law, “Everything I write about is all me. They’re all me, all of them. In *Still Life* each one of those people, and especially each one of the women, was me. But especially the wife. I got into the wife totally, totally got her down. That was very personal. And of course, the politics of that piece were very

³¹⁸ Bestko, 281.

³¹⁹ Sturken, 1.

³²⁰ Sturken, 9.

close to me.”³²¹ I must also note that quotes about the, such as this one, often separate the characters from the person by referring to “the wife,” “the veteran,” and the “lover” or “mistress.” I have found myself doing this as well, but this strips them of all the other roles they play in the world, if not in *Still Life*. This closeness and passion Mann had about and against the war in Vietnam pushed her to create *Still Life* and to highlight the anger she had about violence and war.

Few playwrights set out to intentionally make the kind of impact that Mann has done. But arguably all playwrights set out with a mission, an agenda, or at least of hope of how audiences will respond to their work. I asked Mann, what she hoped audiences would get from *Still Life*. She explained, “I wanted people, now with the war over, to talk. Talk about who we are and what we have done to others and ourselves.”³²² This is a continual battle after major political or social tragedies, such as the Vietnam War. Society craves answers and while some want to keep the silence, others beg to continue, or at least start, the conversation. Mann is one of those who kept the war at the forefront of people’s minds,

No one could talk about the war at that point and this play was a plea for discussion about the war. A plea for people to start the process of...of dealing with people on both sides of the issue. It was a way to give testimony to the nation about what really happened. To look at veterans who were spit on, jeered at, hated by anti-war demonstrators—it was a way of saying “no, no, no these are our brothers. You have got to hear them.”³²³

³²¹ Buchanan Bienen, Leigh. “Emily Mann.” *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*. Eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996, 210.

³²² Emily Mann.

³²³ Emily Mann.

As a playwright she was able to take “the ordinary words of unordinary people” and allow them to be heard.³²⁴ This testimony, the sharing of stories is vital to understanding the war and also healing from it. And for some, it is necessary in order to move past it. The passion with which Mann spoke about the war showed how to her, the Vietnam War remains present. And again Mann brought the conversation to today, “How we deal with veterans today is a direct response to how we shamed Vietnam veterans as they returned from war; an unfairly fought war. Those people who paid the most. The country went nuts because they knew it was wrong.”³²⁵ I asked, how did people respond to the play? “It blew people away. People would stay and talk for hours. The play had enormous impact. An anti-war play that went beyond Vietnam. A play about violence—violence to women,” answered Mann.³²⁶ She has also described the play, and all Vietnam War plays as “pleas for examination and self-examination of our own violence.”³²⁷

One question I had for Mann, and for everyone I speak with about Vietnam War plays, is why are Vietnam War plays produced less often than World War II plays or even World War I plays? At the start, her answer was simple: the Vietnam War was and is more complicated than World War I or II. “Those wars were ‘good guys’ vs. ‘bad guys.’ And we are ‘good guys.’ But Vietnam is more complicated than that. If you don’t see shades of grey, then the story is not entertaining. It needs to be uncomfortable.”³²⁸ She believes that people are more interested in what sells tickets

³²⁴ Dawson, 162.

³²⁵ Emily Mann.

³²⁶ Emily Mann.

³²⁷ Jason, 73.

³²⁸ Emily Mann.

instead of “scary-soul-searching.” Mann continued, “They [the play and the war] have everything to do with now. People say, ‘Oh that’s over, we don’t want to talk about it.’ But you wouldn’t say that about a World War II play.”³²⁹ And as Robertson points out, “Both the perception of the war as a movie and the reality of the war itself were part of the peculiarly American realities of the 1960’s and early 1970’s. Once the war was over, Americans seemed to forget that it had happened, but at the same time, they made and watched and even gave awards to movies about it.”³³⁰ This statement speaks specifically of Vietnam War films, but it is in the Vietnam plays, like *Still Life*, that Mann and other playwrights have tried to force audiences to remember the war and to talk about it. Vietnam War films are even more recognizable than the plays and they serve as yet another representation of the war in Vietnam, therefore they are a strong point of comparison. Sturken discusses how specifically docudramas (in film) are perhaps “less complete and less accurate than historical texts, they have greater cultural significance because they reach mass audiences and younger people who may have little prior knowledge of the war.”³³¹ As a society we take images from the popular Vietnam War films such as helicopters flying over in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Jon Voight in a wheel chair in *Coming Home* (1978). These images, among others, provide or create new elements in cultural and national memory of the war, just as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) did for the landings in Normandy. As a nation, we hold past wars up to different standards or expectations, even ideologies. Murry Polner interviewed hundreds of Vietnam

³²⁹ Emily Mann.

³³⁰ Robertson, 4.

³³¹ Sturken, 86.

veterans and included nine of those interviews in his book *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* (1971), in which he declares, “They have been ignored, as soldiers and as veterans. Unlike the returning servicemen of earlier wars, they have not been celebrated in film or song; there are no victory parades.”³³² “No victory parades,” it is a trope and cliché, but it was also the reality. Mann said, “People want to forget the Vietnam War. We are still in a cultural divide—a divided nation on the line of Vietnam. Who is a patriot and who isn’t? Who has family values and who doesn’t?”³³³ Mann also expressed her frustrations with how the war in Vietnam (and those who served in it) is used as a political tool. She provided the example of the United States Secretary of State, John Kerry. Kerry is a Vietnam veteran who “served and served with distinction,” according to Mann. But when he ran for president in 2004, the media “made him into a traitor of some kind. And then there was George W. [Bush]—a bad soldier, but a war hero.”³³⁴ Mann explained that the difference is that “Kerry went against the war when he returned from Vietnam.”³³⁵ But despite Mann’s frustrations with past and current political circumstances she said, “*Still Life* does get done.”³³⁶ Perhaps not as often and perhaps not with the same intent of its early productions, but it does get performed. To this day, Mann struggles with discussing the play and the war. “It is a hard play for me to talk about it because it took so much out of me. It may be my best play, the one with the most lasting impact. It was the most uncompromising break-thru

³³² Polner, xiv.

³³³ Emily Mann.

³³⁴ Emily Mann.

³³⁵ Emily Mann.

³³⁶ Emily Mann.

play.”³³⁷ And it was. Mann was by no means the first, only, or best to write plays in the documentary genre, but *Still Life* made its own unique splash in the pond of American theatre.

She encouraged me when she said, “It is *the* war to be studying.” Mann believes we, as a nation, are making the same mistakes in Iraq that we made in Vietnam. “Same division and dysfunction in the country. Why now? It’s in the pocket. It links back to Vietnam. It’s the same war,”³³⁸ Mann said with anger. She continued, “Iraq—if there would have been a draft, we wouldn’t be in the same place as we are now.” One of the biggest mistakes, in Mann’s opinion, is the lack of understanding of the region and the geography. This idea is argued again and again from various perspectives: the importance of the geography in war. And now, “We’ve come full-circle, none of these things got resolved. All covered over.”³³⁹ She described our government as “gridlocked.” Like many artists, Mann cannot ignore the deep divide she sees across the country. She went as far to have said, “We can barely contain our rage against each other. It’s a civil war waiting to happen. That’s the level of rage. Blind rage against each other. The hatred for Obama.”³⁴⁰ Our conversation of the past with the present continued for well over twenty minutes. We kept circling back to a discussion of the youth and students and their responses and impact on major historical and current moments. We spoke of the shootings at Kent State and the riots in Ferguson. All I could see was the disconnect between youth responses to Vietnam and the changes that spurred from them and youth

³³⁷ Emily Mann.

³³⁸ Emily Mann.

³³⁹ Emily Mann.

³⁴⁰ Emily Mann.

responses to Ferguson and the resulting violence and seeming inaction. Mann pointed to, what she believes to be the disconnect: the draft. Mann elaborated that it was because of the draft that everyone was in the “same boat. We all have our lives in danger. It was so personal. We were watching friends go, get drafted, leave the country, or go to jail. We were watching our friends, family members, and people we knew being sent to war. And some of them would come back and some of them wouldn’t.”³⁴¹ She explained how we can look at Ferguson from afar because we are safe from it, but with the draft no matter who you were or where you were, you were at risk if you were within the draft eligibility requirements. I probed Mann when I said, “Yes, but what can *we* do? We, as theatre artists, what can we do?” She responded, “Theatre. We do theatre so people can talk these things through. We tell the story so people will talk to each other.”³⁴² Mann has made a career out of inspiring and encouraging people to talk to one another.

Not even a month after we spoke, I received the July/August 2015 edition of *American Theatre* magazine of which Mann graced the cover. The article gives a brief overview of her career before the McCarter Theatre. In which, Alexis Greene (theatre scholar and Mann’s biographer) writes, “For Mann, the late ‘60s and ‘70s were years of political radicalization, particularly in opposition to the Vietnam War. She loathed the U.S. government’s escalating conflict and called out American corporations for profiting on the backs of American soldiers.”³⁴³ This push against the war in Vietnam and the country’s reactions continue to influence who Mann is as

³⁴¹ Emily Mann.

³⁴² Emily Mann.

³⁴³ “The Quiet Radical.” *American Theatre*. TCG. July/August 2015, 25.

a playwright, director, and producer. The article then provides a more in-depth look at her contributions and controversies since joining the McCarter Theatre. Mann has an impressive resume of theatrical work, but her career is tethered to her earliest works *Annulla, An Autobiography* (1977/1985) and *Still Life* (1980). Mann's work as "evolved," according to Savran, which,

[C]ombines her interest and her understanding of musical architecture and counterpoint. In each, she illuminates a particular circumstance by running historical fact against a number of interwoven voices that describe the feeling of an event from the inside. Through this counterpoint of objective and subjective, documentary evidence and real speech, she draws a complex portrait of a particular society. The interplay of perspectives clarifies the network of individual motives and provides insight into the larger social matrix of which they are a part.³⁴⁴

Due to Mann's interest and passion for music, there are often comparisons made between her writing and music. Specifically in *Still Life*, the way she has pieced together the voices of the three characters are seen and heard as musical. "What Mann achieves with the contrapuntal voicings is that no single voice can ever build up narrative momentum and stake out a claim for the spectator's sympathy. ... Almost like a musical score, this play is an investigation of consonant and dissonant relationships," Ringnalda asserts.³⁴⁵ It is her "complex portrait" and musical nature of her telling of the Vietnam War veteran in *Still Life*, which I examine here.

In Savran's analysis of *Still Life* he contends that the play is less about Vietnam and more about how men and women deal with anger and guilt through violence. He lays out his argument that the play "carefully diagrams chains of violence—spouses brutalizing each other and parents abusing their children—to

³⁴⁴ Savran, "Emily Mann," 145-146.

³⁴⁵ Jason, 77.

show how violence is fostered within the family and passed on from one generation to the next.”³⁴⁶ Ringnalda argues that Mann’s point is “the tangled, ruptured voices allow (and force) the audience to see the real theater of Vietnam where we all were ‘it.’ The real Vietnam is not other, not an isolated, sickly surreal aberration of American identity.”³⁴⁷ But instead, Ringnalda continues, that Mann’s depiction of the war “is a logical continuation, a mere symptom of violence masked by seemingly respectable values, marriages, fatherhood, motherhood, even the church. Dysfunctional families and social institutions are seen here virtually as basic training for Vietnam.”³⁴⁸ Savran sees Mann’s play as an examination of violence, specifically domestic violence, through the utilization of the Vietnam War as a mere backdrop or setting, that “Mann draws a distressing and ineluctable connection between imperialist forays abroad and brutality at home.”³⁴⁹ There is perhaps some truth in Savran’s analysis of *Still Life*, I would argue against his point that the Vietnam War is merely a setting. Mann had and still has an interest in women’s rights and domestic violence, but the play is a story about a man who went to war and was lucky enough to survive it. How the war affected him and how he treats the women in his life are entangled and inseparable. But there is also this question: would [Mark] have been violent towards women regardless of the war? Though Mann herself told Savran in the interview, “A lot of people think *Still Life* is a play about a Vietnam veteran.”³⁵⁰ This is the only instance in which I have found her to

³⁴⁶ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 146.

³⁴⁷ Jason, 77-78.

³⁴⁸ Jason, 77-78.

³⁴⁹ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 146.

³⁵⁰ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 150.

say something to this effect. I agree with Savran when he claims, “While addressing the relation between public and private violence, Mann’s plays analyze the transmission of brutality by focusing on inheritance not as a *fait accompli* but as a process.”³⁵¹ But the fact remains, that the dialogue in the play is the words of a Vietnam veteran. The stories Mark tells are stories of the war and what the war did to him upon his return home. Those facts irrefutably make the play about a Vietnam veteran, even if that is not the sole purpose of the play.

Text Analysis and Theoretical Applications

Still Life is a documentary play about three people Emily Mann met in Minnesota during the summer of 1978. The dialogue is made up of the people’s own words as Mann recorded and transcribed them. These are the opening words of Mann’s *Still Life* “Author’s Note.” Mann goes on to discuss the “look,” “rhythms,” and “style” of the play. The value and weight of these three elements—look, rhythms, and style—dictate the direction and reception of *Still Life*. Mann directed the premiere production of *Still Life* at the Goodman Studio Theater in Chicago during the fall of 1980. It later moved to the American Place Theater, Off-Broadway, in February of 1981.

Still Life tells the true story and honest words of three people-turned-characters: Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine. Mark is 28 years old, a Marine, and a Vietnam veteran. Cheryl, Mark’s wife, is also 28. Mark’s friend/girlfriend, Nadine is 43. Each character tells their story individually, only overlapping at rare moments. Mark’s journey in the play is somewhat that of a rollercoaster—up and down. At moments,

³⁵¹ Savran, “Emily Mann,” 146.

he is proud of his service and at other times, he is plagued with guilt. Mark carries this guilt and violence with him through the entire play and potentially through his entire life. Cheryl, his wife, attempts to ignore Mark's anger, his behavior, and even his brutalization of her. She believes, in time, his memories, anger, and violence will fade. Nadine sees Mark in an entirely different light. She blames the "system" (the government, the military, etc.) for forcing Mark to go to Vietnam in the first place. "In the end, these three become a metaphor for the nation as a whole – still trying to understand, and overcome, the lingering trauma that is the bitter legacy of the Vietnam experience."³⁵² Even today in 2015, we, as a country, struggle to understand and overcome the tragedy of the war in Vietnam.

This documentary play, *Still Life*, approaches the war in Vietnam in unique ways: 1) the conversations took place four years after the war ended; 2) Mann approached the story not only from the perspective of the veteran, but also the women in his life; 3) the various reactions to the veteran. Savran describes Mann's use of documentary materials as a means to create a more "comprehensive picture that illuminates the origin and means of perpetuation of violence in American society. Her plays dramatize the realization that there is no moral high ground, that all are implicated in the workings of brutality, and that there is not easy escape from violence, coercion and decay."³⁵³ Here he references additional plays, but also includes *Still Life* in his explanation. The play provides different approaches to the three discussion points, among others, I examine in the plays: 1) wounding (the moments of injury and its repercussions); 2) coming home; 3) commemorating (via

³⁵² Mann, back cover.

³⁵³ Savran, "Emily Mann," 147.

medals and memorials). The setting of the play is described as “In a theater, the time is now, the place: where we are.”³⁵⁴ The play is meant to be performed with minimal setting often with just three separate locations, dictated by three chairs or three desks. Projections and the use of photos are vitally important to the storytelling and style of the play. Dramatists Play Service, Inc., who holds the rights to *Still Life*, does not provide the slides/photos, but notes “each slide mentioned in the text of the play is clearly described as well, and it is suggested that appropriate photos can be found by searching newspaper files and library photo collections and consulting with veterans groups, etc.”³⁵⁵

Men at War

One question that is repeated throughout discussion of war, all war, is the connection between war and masculinity. There are many theorists, psychologists, and historians that approach this topic of the connection between masculinity and war. Studies on this topic go back centuries to the Greeks. More recent approaches include (but are by no means limited to): *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989) by Susan Jeffords; *Male Armor: The Soldier-Hero in Contemporary American Culture* (2008) by Jon Robert Adams; *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* by professor at the University Kansas, Christopher E. Forth (2008); Brenda M. Boyle’s *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives: A Critical Study of Fiction, Films, and Nonfiction Writings* (2009); founder and editor of the journal *Men and Masculinities*, Michael S. Kimmel’s *Manhood in*

³⁵⁴ Mann, 7.

³⁵⁵ Mann, 50.

America: A Cultural History (2012). These studies rely on one another as well as many other sources. These books are particularly relevant for this examination of male Vietnam veterans. I will touch on each book and perspective throughout the discussion of each play. Professor of English and Writing Center Director at Denison University, Brenda Boyle speaks to the narratives surrounding masculinity in the Vietnam War.³⁵⁶ She reasons that the Vietnam War and many social movements of the 1960s “altered the way Americans conceive of masculinity, alterations reflected in visual and textual narratives of the war.”³⁵⁷ Through an examination of film, literature, advertising, and biographical and autobiographical texts Brenda Boyle explores “how the Vietnam War is a venue for the representation of masculinities and, given their historical contingency, how they reflect the present National Symbolic as much as the National Symbolic of the past.”³⁵⁸ Brenda Boyle includes fiction and nonfiction in her study and she posits that the use of nonfiction narratives as well as military recruiting advertisements suggests, “in several ways masculinity has been rescripted in the national ethos.”³⁵⁹ Brenda Boyle makes three points, first, that war has forced Americans to view or imagine masculinity as masculinities (plural) and that the concept of a singular masculinity never truly existed. Second, “the liberation movements of the era clarified the direct impact of such physical identity issues as race, sexuality, and dis/ability on formations of

³⁵⁶ I will refer to this author as Brenda Boyle throughout as to not confuse her with my father or myself. We are not related.

³⁵⁷ Boyle, Brenda M. *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives: A Critical Study of Fiction, Films, and Nonfiction Writings*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2009, 1.

³⁵⁸ Boyle, B., 8.

³⁵⁹ Boyle, B., 1.

masculinities.”³⁶⁰ And third, that the multiplicity of masculinities are found in more than white, straight, men, but that they are also “mutable intimates that the current binary of sex and gender—sex as chromosomal and gender as environmental—is less definitive than it suggests.”³⁶¹

Although “masculinity always is tenuous, war spotlights its precariousness; because the Vietnam War era was a time of crisis for Americans, it heightened anxieties about masculinity.”³⁶² This anxiety aligns with how Nadine describes men in the play. She explains that “Men are stripped.”³⁶³ Nadine worries about men and what we, as a nation, have taken from them. She says, “We don’t know who they are anymore. What’s a man? Where’s the model? [...] We don’t want them to be the provider, because we want to do that ourselves. We don’t want them to be heroes, and we don’t want them to be knights in shining armor. John Wayne – so what’s left for them to be, huh?”³⁶⁴ Because of this approach to men, she blames the war and its expectation of men. Cheryl blames the war too saying, “The war is the base of all our problems.”³⁶⁵ But she references her relationship with Mark, not Mark’s (and other veteran’s) relationship with the world. Also, in Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997) she writes, “The survival narrative of the Vietnam veteran both retrieves and refigures traditional notions of masculinity and warriorhood.”³⁶⁶ Mark addresses this

³⁶⁰ Boyle, B., 1.

³⁶¹ Boyle, B., 1.

³⁶² Boyle, B., 1.

³⁶³ Mann, 23.

³⁶⁴ Mann, 23-24.

³⁶⁵ Mann, 45.

³⁶⁶ Sturken, 255.

question head on, “My biggest question to myself all my life was how I would act under combat. That would be who I was as a man.”³⁶⁷ Brenda Boyle reasons, “American boys are convinced that fighting in a war or participating in its violent counterpart is something they should aspire to do, and men who have not participated in a war sometimes are made to think they missed a rite of passage.”³⁶⁸ Later in the play Mark pushes against this idea, “I don’t want this to come off as a combat story.”³⁶⁹ He has sat in VFWs and veteran events for years listening to and sharing combat stories, but he wants this conversation, with Mann, to be different.

The Veteran’s Archive and Repertoire

Perhaps the most obvious or abrasive quality of the story in *Still Life* is Mark’s recording or archiving the war and his experience in it. Sturken explains, “Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”³⁷⁰ Mark contributes to the cultural memory of the Vietnam War through his archival nature. Mark is an artist and his way of working through, and perhaps surviving, the war was and is (in the play) through art. He took photos, which are displayed throughout the play and he creates paintings and jars. A large portion of the dialogue references Mark’s photos and art as well as its grotesque nature. The first mention of photographs comes in this paragraph of *Still Life*. Mark

³⁶⁷ Mann, 10.

³⁶⁸ Boyle, B., 3.

³⁶⁹ Mann, 11.

³⁷⁰ Sturken, 9.

says, very matter of fact, “This is a picture of my foot. I wanted a picture of it because if I ever lost it, I wanted to remember what it looked like.”³⁷¹ This is how the play begins—with loss and fear. Those themes remain present throughout.

This archival nature in Mark speaks to the work of Diana Taylor and specifically *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Taylor acknowledges, “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices.”³⁷² The choice (or lack thereof) to go to war, the choice to fight, the choice to help another human being each directly impacts our ability to transmit knowledge, our experience of life, and the events that create that affect both knowledge and lived experience. Not only does Taylor support the value and necessity of the archive, but this framework also allows for survivors’ voices and bodies to be seen, heard, and read. All veterans exist within the governmental archive as a file locked away in some room or computer, but they still need the repertoire. I recognize that Taylor also discusses how governments disappear citizens, for this purpose I focus on those that remain—veterans. Through the use of Taylor’s theories and an investigation of archives and repertoires, we can gain a new “way of knowing” about the war, “not simply” another analysis of it.³⁷³ Preservation and communication of the veteran experience in Vietnam through utilization of the archive and the repertoire are less about theory, but more about expressing the unspeakable similar to what Taylor’s is capable of doing. In addition, the act of the contribution to the archive is, in its own

³⁷¹ Mann, 9.

³⁷² Taylor, xvi.

³⁷³ Taylor, xvi.

way, a gesture that assists the transmission of knowledge—a choice that serves the archive and the repertoire. In my research I have found that there is some silence, some hesitation, and some difficulty in communicating the experience of war. What causes this hesitation—is it mental, emotional, a lack of memory? Despite the incommunicable elements, the Vietnam veteran experience remains and deserves preservation. The remains of war linger not only with the dead, but also with the survivors, the veterans.

As historians continue to improve techniques of preservation we must acknowledge and examine how veterans are uniquely able to express the experience of war through their memories and bodies. Perhaps, this preservation allows for the veterans to work through their experiences to access previously “locked” memories, as with my father. Together, the archive and the repertoire are *more* complete, although not entirely whole. Through Taylor’s theory, we can better understand and appreciate the experiences of veterans that other archival methods do not allow. In addition, by looking at Vietnam veterans in this way we can extend Taylor’s application of the repertoire beyond gesture and embodiment to also include the actual body and its wounds.

The slides/photos play a significant role and I asked Mann just how important are the images? She responded, “Very. You need to use it. Well, I trust a director’s visions. They are extremely important. Mark was an artist. The visuals all came at once.”³⁷⁴ Mann told Savran, “Often the slides wake you up because you’re

³⁷⁴ Emily Mann.

getting into this whole language riff and they're a shot of reality."³⁷⁵ Mark controls the slides throughout the play; he displays them and captions them. Sturken makes an interesting argument about how photos function within memory, "Though one could argue that such artifacts [memorials, texts, talismans, images] operate to prompt remembrance, they are often perceived actually to contain memory within them or indeed to be synonymous with memory."³⁷⁶ Sturken adds, "Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze" and "Yet memory does not reside in a photograph, or in any camera image, so much as it is produced by it."³⁷⁷ Mark's responses to the pictures are very matter of fact. He is even somewhat detached from them. He says, "I brought some photos. This is a picture of some people who at one point in time were in my unit. That is, they were there at the time the photo was taken. Some of them are dead, some of them made it home. Some of them are dead now."³⁷⁸ One example of the gruesome nature appears mid-play,

These are some pictures of more or less dead bodies and things. (*Snaps on pictures of mass graves, people half blown apart, gruesome pictures of this particular war.*) I don't know if you want to see them. (*5 slides. Last pictures comes on of a man, eyes towards us, the bones of his arm exposed, the flesh torn, eaten away. It is too horrible to look at. Mark looks at the audience, or hears them.*). Oh, Jesus. Yeah...We have to be patient with each other. (*He snaps the pictures off.*)³⁷⁹

For Mark, the images not only take him back to Vietnam, but also remind him of the death and horror he saw while there. Images from the war were not only captured

³⁷⁵ Savran, "Emily Mann," 155.

³⁷⁶ Sturken, 19.

³⁷⁷ Sturken, 19.

³⁷⁸ Mann, 21.

³⁷⁹ Mann, 27.

by journalists, but also by the soldiers themselves, like Mark. Soldiers in the field were seeing those images and capturing those images in their memory, on their cameras, and in their letters and drawn pictures sent home.

Cheryl tells us how she once opened a drawer in their home and she found pictures that Mark sent back. Pictures of dead men, dead men hanging and “things like that.”³⁸⁰ Cheryl also tells the audience that Mark once sent home a bone from a man that he killed.³⁸¹ Once again, Nadine describes this differently, she says, “I don’t know anyone who cares so much about his parents. He’s trying to save them. Like he sent home this bone of a man he killed, from Nam. It was this neat attempt to demand for them to listen, about the war.”³⁸² Mark is a self-identified “pack rat” who never gets rid of anything. He shares another artifact, “This belt is an artifact. I took it off somebody I killed. It’s an NVA belt. I sent it home. I think it was kind of a trophy. This is the man’s blood. That’s a bullet-hole. This particular fellow had a belt of grenades that were strapped to his belt. See where the rust marks are?”³⁸³ The detail is so specific. To think about how this conversation would have been between him and Mann, brings the images of him carrying in all these objects to the place where they met. Or perhaps it was a meeting at his home where he has these objects lying around, or collected in some way.

The function of an archive is to collect, maintain, and preserve in order to share and transfer the information with the ambiguous future. I must ask: what happens to nonarchival matter? How is that matter communicated and transferred?

³⁸⁰ Mann, 13.

³⁸¹ Mann, 13.

³⁸² Mann, 12.

³⁸³ Mann, 26.

Taylor parsed out in her work the connectedness and yet separateness between the archive and the repertoire.³⁸⁴ Taylor also emphasized, “If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity.”³⁸⁵ The draft did not discriminate between classes therefore all those who qualified for the draft were at risk of going to war.³⁸⁶ But if men were from a certain classes, particularly middle- and upper-middle classes they could avoid going to Vietnam entirely by enrolling in college, getting married, and a variety of other ways out. Polner, in *No Victory Parades*, also notes, “Although the war in Vietnam was presented as necessary for the national interest, comparatively few men from other social classes were forced to fight it.”³⁸⁷ Taylor discusses forms in which to access and transfer knowledge. Taylor explains how the two – archive and repertoire – are important sources of information “both exceeding the limitations of the other.”³⁸⁸ The archive, arguably, is more tangible and more sustainable through preservation and collection, while the repertoire is more intangible and less sustainable by its ephemeral quality. Nadine also tells us, “You know, all Mark did was...he brought the war back home and none of us could look at it.”³⁸⁹ The archive requires recognition, if not an understanding or an appreciation.

Photographs and “trophies” were just part of what Mark created and collected. He also made a series of artistic container art jars. Cheryl, Mark’s wife,

³⁸⁴ Taylor.

³⁸⁵ Taylor, xvii.

³⁸⁶ Although it could be argued that those with more money were able to find ways to evade the war by, for example, enrolling in college.

³⁸⁷ Polner, xiii.

³⁸⁸ Taylor, 21.

³⁸⁹ Mann, 40.

discovers a jar—several jars—after he returned home from Vietnam. She describes one of the jars, “He had a naked picture of me in there, cut out to the form, tied to a stake with a string. And there was all this broken glass, and I know Mark. Broken glass is a symbol of fire. What else did he have at the bottom?”³⁹⁰ She goes on to say, “Yeah, there was a razor blade in there and some negatives of the blood stuff, I think. I mean, that was so violent. That jar to me, scared me. That jar to me said: Mark wants to kill me. Literally kill me for what I’ve done. He’s burning me at the stake like Joan of Arc. It just blew my mind.”³⁹¹ But his lover, Nadine, interprets the jars differently. She explains, “Those jars he makes are brilliant, humorous. He’s preserving the war. I’m intrigued that people think he’s violent. I know all his stories. He calls himself a time-bomb. But so are you, aren’t you?”³⁹² Later she says, “His jars are amazingly original. Artifacts of the war. Very honest.”³⁹³ Mark has created his own preservation, his own archive of the war in a way that would seem morbid to many people, including his wife. It perhaps indicates the severity of his mental state. Sturken writes, “Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation. They can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material evidence on which claims of truth are based, yet they also possess the capacity to capture the unattainable.”³⁹⁴ Images craft a story, a narrative, and perspective of the war that

³⁹⁰ Mann, 10.

³⁹¹ Mann, 10.

³⁹² Mann, 10.

³⁹³ Mann, 31.

³⁹⁴ Sturken, 20.

those who fought in it cannot control. Mark attempts to create and share his own images of his personal experience.

Representations of the war range from films to news programs to Pulitzer Prize winning photographs. Images of helicopters flying overhead in *Apocalypse Now*, of a young Vietnamese girl covered in Napalm, of Jane Fonda sitting with soldiers create a narrative of the war. Sturken explains, “Cultural memory is produced in the United States in various forms, including memorials, public art, popular culture, literature, commodities, and activism. It is generated in the context of a debate over who defines cultural memory, what counts as cultural memory, and, indeed, what cultural memory means.”³⁹⁵ The media (television, news, films, photography, performance, etc.), in part, defined how a nation saw the war in Vietnam. Through the mediatization of the war, the first “televised war,” America saw through the lens of a camera the atrocities of war as they sat safely in their homes. Jeremy Tunstall, writer and journalist, finds that the United States “remains unique in that most Americans are exposed [via various media forms] almost entirely to their own nation’s history, culture, and mythology” and as a result, citizens of the U.S. regard the war almost entirely through the lens of the U.S. media.³⁹⁶ A civilian’s limited-access to war exists via the media and perhaps personal accounts of friends or family or personal research. As Andrew Huebner, Professor of History at the University of Alabama, reminds us, the media “carried portraits of war to the American home front during and after” World War II, the

³⁹⁵ Sturken, 1-2.

³⁹⁶ Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, xiv.

Korean War, and the Vietnam War.³⁹⁷ Mark says, “The truth of it is, it’s different from what we’ve heard about war before. [...] It’s a tragedy is what it is. It happened to a lot of people.”³⁹⁸ The Vietnam War coverage was unique due to the dissent of the nation as the war waged (and raged) on. Audiences were able to read about the war in the newspaper, see footage of soldiers on the ground, and respond to them more immediately than in the past. The media creates representations and discourses of war that, perhaps, cannot be erased. Audiences give agency to the images that present and represent the war, as it imprints images of the war in their minds.

The Jean-Paul Sartre quote, “What we see is neither real, because after all we are looking at actors acting, nor unreal, as everything that happens makes us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam,” highlights the binary between what is seen (known) and unseen (unknown) and this binary is continually present in the discussion of the war in Vietnam.³⁹⁹ The literal and figurative distance between the United States and Vietnam impacted all elements of the war: communication, comprehension, acceptance, etc. The American public can only support or oppose what they can “see,” therefore the representations of the war were vital. “Vietnam War movies and literature did present American audiences with more disturbing imagery about their culture, soldiers, and institutions of authority than ever before,”

³⁹⁷ Huebner, Andrew J. *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 1.

³⁹⁸ Mann, 11.

³⁹⁹ Alter, viii.

and Mark in *Still Life* is not different.⁴⁰⁰ John Carlos Rowe, professor at the University of Southern California, writes about the Vietnam War and American culture, “The silence with which we greeted the veterans of that war was symptomatic of this collective repression of what we had made of ourselves.”⁴⁰¹ The country was struggling and perhaps still struggles with guilt. Our guilt about not only the involvement in Vietnam, but also guilt about the lives lost and guilt about what we put Marines, like [Mark], through.

Women and the War

Women, play a vital role in the Vietnam War. Women served as nurses just like they have throughout U.S. military history. There are the names of eight women on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.⁴⁰² There were also some women advisors, but because the draft did not apply to women, there were not women serving in combat. This has changed since the Vietnam War, but women still have to overcome challenges and obstacles that men do not in the U.S. military. Reston, Jr. claims,

Facts and men in power are not at the core of this story, but rather the emotions of the generation which shouldered the profound consequences of this ill-conceived enterprise. The Vietnam generation, reacting to the decisions from on high, changed American society forever, and so the heart of the matter is emotional and cultural.⁴⁰³

Reston, Jr. argues that men are not the central element of the story, but the gender of the characters cannot be dismissed. Mark says, “It’s guilt...it’s a dumb thing...it

⁴⁰⁰ Huebner, 243.

⁴⁰¹ Rowe, John Carlos and Rick Berg. Ed. *The Vietnam War and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 2.

⁴⁰² “American Military Women who Died in the Vietnam War.” *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. <http://www.thewall-usa.com/women.asp>

⁴⁰³ Reston, Jr., vii.

makes no sense logically...but I'm afraid there's this karma I built up of hurting...there are children involved...like it's all going to balance out at the expense of my kids."⁴⁰⁴ Guilt plays a major role in veterans, not just veterans of the Vietnam War, but all wars. Mark acknowledges his guilt outright throughout the play. "It's become a *personal* thing. The guilt. There IS the guilt. It's getting off on having all that power every day. Because it was so nice. I mean, it was the power..."⁴⁰⁵ And Mark admits to the anxiety he feels when he loses any element of control, during and after the war.⁴⁰⁶ Mark quickly realizes the power he has, "I had the power of life and death. I wrote home to my brother. I wrote him, I told him. I wrote: I dug it. I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it."⁴⁰⁷ The power as well as his enjoyment of it causes fear and anger. "I'm sorry. I don't think you understand. Sure, I was pissed off at myself that I let myself go. [...] You have orders, you have your job, you've got to DO it."⁴⁰⁸ In country, Mark's guilt seemed to be ever present, but especially after he confesses that he killed a Vietnamese family. "I...I killed three children, a mother and father in cold blood. [...] I killed them with a pistol in front of a lot [sic] of people. I demanded something from the parents and then systematically destroyed them. And that's...that's the heaviest part of what I'm carrying around," he confesses.⁴⁰⁹ This idea of power that he mentions much earlier in the play comes back during his confession. He explains that he was angry with the power he possessed, as though he is blaming someone for giving him this power, for trusting him with it. This act,

⁴⁰⁴ Mann, 45.

⁴⁰⁵ Mann, 18.

⁴⁰⁶ Mann, 27.

⁴⁰⁷ Mann, 19.

⁴⁰⁸ Mann, 23.

⁴⁰⁹ Mann, 46.

killing in cold blood, affected him mentally, but also impacted his relationship with men in his unit.

Mark tells the audience that people from his unit watched him kill the family and that some of the men even tried to stop him. After it was over and done, he lost the trust and respect from some men in this unit. Mark's confession is one of the few true monologues left uncut by Mann. It continues for a page and a half, in which he unloads his fear, frustration, guilt, and ultimately, sadness. He says, "All that a person can do is try and find words to try and excuse me, but I know it's the same damn thing as lining Jews up. It's no different than what the Nazis did. It's the same thing."⁴¹⁰ In an interview, Mann said that it was not until the last day that she met with Mark that he confessed to her. It was as if all the conversations led to that moment and ends with Mark exasperated, "I'm shell-shocked."⁴¹¹ Mark says,

I don't know. I just don't know. Sometimes I look at a news story I look at something someone goes to prison for here, I think about it. There's no difference. It's just a different place. This country had all these rules and regulations and then all of a sudden they removed these things. Then you come back and try to make your life in that society where you had to deal with them. You find that if you violate them, which I found, you go to jail, which I did. I sit back here sometimes and watch the news, watch my mother, watch my father. My parents watch the news and say: "Oh my God somebody did that! Somebody went in there...and started shooting...and killed all those people. They ought to execute him." I look at them. I want to say "Hell, what the fuck, why didn't you ever listen...you want to hear what I did?" It's a real confusion. I'm guilty and I'm not guilty. I still want to tell my folks. I need to tell them what I did.⁴¹²

Mark grapples with the same issues of guilt that D.J. does in *Medal of Honor Rag*. It is almost a question of rules of engagement: what is the difference between murder in

⁴¹⁰ Mann, 46.

⁴¹¹ Mann, 47.

⁴¹² Mann, 45.

war and murder in peacetime? That confusion plagues many veterans, of all wars, not just the war in Vietnam.

Mark's guilt is also tied to his fear of how he and other veterans are perceived. Perhaps this fear is related to the nation's fear of its own perception. Jeffords notes, "Nixon identifies what he calls the 'Vietnam Syndrome' prevalent in American society since the war. Its features are isolationism, an unwillingness 'to use power to defend national interests' and Americans who are 'ashamed of their power' and feel 'guilty about being strong.'"⁴¹³ Throughout Vietnam War literature, guilt is tied to strength. After returning home, he was fearful and paranoid. Before he confesses, he shares, "It's getting hard to talk. Obviously, I need to tell it, but I don't want to be seen as...a monster."⁴¹⁴ This is in 1978, eight years after Mark returned from Vietnam and the feeling was still present. Mark's fear of how he is perceived remains throughout the play, "I thought everybody knew...I thought everybody knew what I did over there and that they were against me. I was scared. I felt guilty and a sense of..." Mark trails off.⁴¹⁵ At an earlier point in the play, Mark comes to a realization, "I'm just moving through society now."⁴¹⁶ Due to his awareness and guilt, he only feels as though he is moving through it, but no longer a part of it.

Despite his experiences in Vietnam he says that he sees the war through his wife, "She's a casualty too. She doesn't get benefits for combat duties. The war

⁴¹³ Jeffords, 43.

⁴¹⁴ Mann, 20.

⁴¹⁵ Mann, 34.

⁴¹⁶ Mann, 20.

busted up my wife...,” and he leaves the sentence unfinished.⁴¹⁷ Mark understands the impact on the women left behind or the women who came into the lives of veterans once they returned home. There are too many “representations of women as unable to understand the war” and that just was not the reality, as Jeffords notes in an article.⁴¹⁸ In *the Remasculinization of America*, Jeffords not only discusses men, but also women and the intersection between feminism and masculinity. One of the goals of her book is to “identify some of the ways in which the tensions between ‘masculinity’ and ‘men’ are addressed, tensions worked out and compensated for specifically in relation to women and the feminine.”⁴¹⁹ Mark speaks to this issue throughout the play and how differently each woman in his life, Cheryl and Nadine, respond to him somewhat represents this tension Jeffords examines. Cheryl and Nadine, as I have shown, have polarized perspectives of Mark. Cheryl is afraid of him and Nadine adores him. Cheryl thinks he is insane, Nadine thinks he is brilliant. Either Mark’s behavior differs between the two women or the women’s reception of him is different, or perhaps both.

Later in the play, Mark describes his wife again, “Cheryl is like a comrade. She’s walking wounded now. You don’t leave a comrade on the field.”⁴²⁰ But he does not say what he can and/or is willing to do to help her. What is interesting is that he did not meet Cheryl until after his time in Vietnam. Therefore, when he says that the “war busted up my wife,” what he is implying is that *he* busted up his wife, that his

⁴¹⁷ Mann, 21.

⁴¹⁸ Hixson, Walter L. Ed. *The United States and the Vietnam War: Historical Memory and Representations of the Vietnam War*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000, 89.

⁴¹⁹ Jeffords, xiii.

⁴²⁰ Mann, 41.

behavior upon his return from Vietnam was directed towards Cheryl. Although, we never learn the details of the violence Mark does to Cheryl, it is referenced throughout as Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine mention how Mark hit Cheryl, repeatedly. Early in the play Mark says, "I know I did things to you, Cheryl. But you took it. I'm sorry. How many times can I say I'm sorry to you? I've, uh, I've, uh hurt my wife."⁴²¹ Mark not only "hurt" Cheryl, but in his own words put her life in danger, "My wife has come close to death a number of times, but uh..." and then fades out.⁴²² But even the guilt of this extreme violence towards his wife does not seem to match the guilt of his confession later in the play.

For Mark, violence and sexuality become entangle. Jinim Park, a professor at the University of Korea argues, "Sexuality is the most prevalent, most powerful source providing soldiers with strength or energy to survive."⁴²³ Throughout my research of plays and narrative of Vietnam War veterans I have found countless discussions and approaches to the connection between sex and violence; some are more blatant and violent than others. There is a history of abuse and prostitution during the war in Vietnam. Kathleen Barry, sociologist and feminist, investigates women and sexuality in her book *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (1996), "Prostitution in Vietnam was only part of the wartime sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women. Through massive raping in war men humiliate their enemy."⁴²⁴ Historians and playwrights alike examine prostitution and rape during the war, including David

⁴²¹ Mann, 10.

⁴²² Mann, 10.

⁴²³ Park, Jinim. *Narratives of the Vietnam War by Korean and American Writers*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2007, 46.

⁴²⁴ Barry, Kathleen. *The Prostitution of Sexuality*. New York: New York University Press, 1996, 130.

Rabe. The sexual elements of the war and the relationship between masculinity and sex are complex and cannot be fully addressed here, but it is a significant element of Mann's play in the role of Mark. We do not learn Mark's relationship to sex pre-Vietnam, but there are numerous stories about sex and the comparison of war to sex, post-Vietnam. Cheryl is the first to point to the issues Mark, and in her opinion men in the military in general, has with sex. She says,

I mean men would not be going on fighting like this for centuries if there wasn't something like Mark says. I mean he said it was like orgasm. He said it was the best sex he ever had. You know where he can take that remark. But what better explanation can you want? And believe me, that is Mark's definition of glory. Orgasm is GLORY to Mark.⁴²⁵

Mark compares sex and power continuously. He says, "It's [meaning the power] like the best dope you've ever had, the best sex you've ever had."⁴²⁶ For Mark, the two—power and sex—seem inseparable. "Everything he's done, everything is sexually orientated in some way. Whether it's nakedness or violence—it's all sexually orientated. And I don't know where this comes from," says Cheryl.⁴²⁷ Her statement is true for Mark as well as Cheryl and Nadine, as they each describe Mark's sexual nature. Kimmel, in describing evolutionary psychology in the 1970s, presents, "males have a natural predisposition toward promiscuity, sex without love, and parental indifference."⁴²⁸ Cheryl cites that Mark even pushed her to do things sexually that she was not previously interested in. Cheryl says, "Christ! Mark pushed me into that, once, too. We were doing this smack deal in Hong Kong. He brought

⁴²⁵ Mann, 19.

⁴²⁶ Mann, 18.

⁴²⁷ Mann, 26.

⁴²⁸ Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press, 2012, 258.

this woman into our room. He wanted me to play with her. He wanted me to get it one with her, too. It just blew my mind. I mean it just blew me away."⁴²⁹ She never says that he forced her, but sexual experimentation became more and more of what Mark desired.

The Wounds of War

I have found that there is often causal and/or brief qualities perhaps even flippancy, in the way that the wounds and being wounded are communicated. The graphic nature in which wounds are discussed is found in all three plays, but especially in *Medal of Honor Rag* and *Still Life*. Mark also discusses the dead and wounded with the small flippancy and matter-of-fact style as the other plays as though distancing himself from it, as we have seen with his response to his pictures. He put up a picture on a screen and says,

This fellow up there, that's Michele. [referencing a photo] He ended up in the nut-house, that's the fellow I pulled out of the bush. This is the machine gunner. The kid was so good he handled the gun like spraying paint. This kid was from down south. Smart kid. He got hit in the head, with grenade shrapnel. He's alive, but he got rapped in the head. That was the end of the war for him.⁴³⁰

It is almost as if there is a hidden or secretive element of being wounded. Not that the injuries and experience of being wounded are not significant, but instead there is a quiet quality to it. This again points to the inexpressible nature of the Vietnam War experience.

⁴²⁹ Mann, 34-35.

⁴³⁰ Mann, 24.

The individual experience in war is just that—individual, but it is part of the collective experience especially for the wounded. In a way, the individual is representative of the repertoire and the collective is that of the archive. Even the terminology used to discuss war implies a connectedness between the individual and the collective: “the war” (which implies the conflation of training, battles, and war), “the veterans” (which implies shared experience), “the history” (which implies that there is only one), and more. It is necessary to use language to communicate these elements of war and it is also important to remember the individual as separate *and* part of the collective. This binary is recounted in hundreds of books written by veterans of the war in Vietnam including many of the higher-ups such as General Westmoreland (four-star general who commanded U.S. military operations in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s), Robert McNamara (who served as Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson), and more. General Westmoreland reveals elements of his experience, “This is my personal story, yet inevitably it represents more than that; for my story is inextricably involved with the stories of those who served with me during thirty-six years in the United States Army.”⁴³¹ The collective Vietnam experience adds to what has shaped the U.S. perspective of war and its veterans. In his book, *A Soldier Reports* (1976), Westmoreland looked back on his experience in Vietnam and tried to make sense of it for himself and the reader (again, a common characteristic of books like his). Upon Westmoreland’s retirement in June 1972 he wrote, “As I look back on my life, I thank God for the opportunity that was given to me to be a soldier. If given that opportunity again, I would with the

⁴³¹ Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.

same pride and even greater humility raise my hand and take once again the soldier's oath."⁴³² Veterans and career military men and women are tied together through their military work and often share similar experiences. Those experiences live in both the archive and the repertoire by capturing images, recording narratives, and examining the bodies.

The Vietnam War silenced "many hundreds of thousands of American men and women with the pain of mental and physical disabilities."⁴³³ The silence of veterans of Vietnam is a result of numerous known and unknown causes. There are the physical (or visible) wounds: amputees, shrapnel scars, paralysis, gun shot wounds and more. There are the mental (or invisible) wounds: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), drug and alcohol addiction among others, much of which is seen in Mark throughout *Still Life*. The wounds of war occupy a space in the archive and in the repertoire. Once scarred, the body cannot forget and serves as a tool for memory. Veteran's bodies physically embody the war within their wounds, but Mark never speaks specifically of his wounds, only his Purple Heart, which I discuss later. The body archives the injuries as part of the repertoire—the body becomes an archive of wounds, but those same wounds represent the repertoire—artifacts of war that cannot be preserved in an archive (building, digital, etc.) with the exception of photographs and wound-narratives. Without Mark's photographs and now his words via Mann's play, his story and experience would be lost. The wounds and the accompanying narratives are, in a sense, a performance of the war experience and a literal performance in the case of Vietnam War plays. In turn, that experience is

⁴³² Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, ii.

⁴³³ Boyle, B., *Masculinity*, 100.

often communicated through some means of performance—through the remembering, telling, and retelling of it. Many of the wounds, especially the invisible ones “would not typically present themselves until long after the War’s end.”⁴³⁴

Commemorating the War

The wounded, like Mark, also gained additional accouterments of war: medals. The medals given to soldiers and veterans are artifacts of remembrance. The Purple Heart is given to those who are wounded or killed, the Bronze Star is awarded for acts of heroism or merit, and the Combat Infantry Badge is awarded to infantry men who served in active ground combat, along with many others. Mark does not believe that all Purple Hearts that were awarded were earned, “A lot of people bullshitted that war for alot [sic] of purple hearts. I heard about a guy who was in the rear who went to a whorehouse. He got cut up or something like that. And he didn’t want to pay the woman or something like that. He ended up with a Purple Heart.”⁴³⁵ Bravery and valor, which these men display does not come without fear., Based on John Keegan’s book *The Face of Battle* (1983), Russell Weigley the past Distinguished University Professor of History at Temple University noted, “the dominant emotion and experience in battle is to be scared.”⁴³⁶ Veterans (or their families) often donate medals to museums, archives, etc. and this is another example of the space between the archive and the repertoire filled by the gesture (repertoire) of donating a tangible item (the medal) to the archive. There are stories

⁴³⁴ Boyle, B., *Masculinity*, 101.

⁴³⁵ Mann, 26.

⁴³⁶ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World War, Korea, and Vietnam*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003, vii.

of men and women throwing their medals over the fence towards the White House, some frame their medals in their offices or homes, some keep them in a drawer locked away, some have them tattooed on their body, and some dispose of them by one way or another.

Mark's relationship and recognition of his actions and therefore his medals is displayed in a much different way than other Vietnam War plays. The remains of war linger not only with the dead, but also with the survivors. At one point, he clicks on the projector and displays a picture of himself in full dress uniform. Mark and Cheryl discuss the medals. Mark says, "This is a picture of my first purple heart."⁴³⁷ This phrasing implies that he received more than one. But Mark only explains how, where, or why he was wounded and earned the Purple Heart in abstract terms, "I don't know. We were out in the bush. To me, a Purple Heart meant it was something you got when you got wounded and you bled. You were hurt during a contact. I didn't feel anything getting it. But I wanted a picture of it."⁴³⁸ Just like he wanted a picture of his foot in case he ever lost it. Later he explains, "Actually, I was pissed off about getting that medal."⁴³⁹ The story he tells is brief. He explains that there were South Vietnamese that were sent out with American troops. These men served a variety of functions such guides, interpreters, etc. Mark continues, "They didn't really give a shit. [...] If things got too hot you could always count on them running. Jack-asses."⁴⁴⁰ Based on the context provided, Mark was likely injured in some sort of situation in which he believes the South Vietnamese did not do their job and

⁴³⁷ Mann, 26.

⁴³⁸ Mann, 26.

⁴³⁹ Mann, 26.

⁴⁴⁰ Mann, 26.

therefore he got wounded. It is not until the very end of the play that he speaks somewhat more specifically about being wounded. Mark says, "My unit got blown up. It was a high contact. We got hit very, very hard. The Marine Corps sends you this extra food, fresh fruit, bread, a reward when you've had a heavy loss."⁴⁴¹ Again, his story lacks detail, but his experience is full of detail.

John Carlos Rowe suggests, "As important and still urgent as the real circumstances of our Vietnam veterans are for our critical understanding of the Vietnam War's significance for America's future, we must acknowledge that the veteran's *experience* of the war both in Vietnam and in the United States by no means encompasses the significance of Vietnam for American culture."⁴⁴² Hundreds of books have been written (and continue to be written) about the war in Vietnam, but the country still grapples with questions: why the U.S. fought, why the U.S. lost, who is to blame, why the U.S. was there, why the U.S. stayed for as long as it did, what lessons can be learned, what sacrifices did our soldiers make and what was the Vietnam experience? These books along with the films and plays (and other cultural representations) about the war strive to create a new addition to the archive or to help bridge the gap between archive and the repertoire. There is a common theme found within books about the Vietnam War and the veterans who fought, "If a war is deemed worthy of the dedication and sacrifice of the military services, it is also worthy of the commitment of the entire population."⁴⁴³ In order to be committed to the soldiers and veterans, their stories must be told and must be shared. Each

⁴⁴¹ Mann, 50.

⁴⁴² Rowe, 11.

⁴⁴³ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 411.

examination of the war in Vietnam treats the veteran experience in a different way. In *Winter Soldiers*, Richard Stacewicz (Professor of Social Science and History at Oakton Community College) addresses “why some Americans returned from Vietnam opposed to the war” and in his research and preparation to talk to veterans he (along with other interviewers) created questions that would direct the discussion into areas long since ‘forgotten’ or no longer considered of consequence.”⁴⁴⁴ An investigation of what may be viewed as forgotten or no longer considered of consequence is, in part, the goal of Taylor’s theories of the archive and the repertoire.

Soldiers Coming Home: PTSD

For some, the war’s beginning and ending are blurry. Plays like *Still Life*, bring the war back to the U.S. and force the audience to remember. “For most Americans in Vietnam, however, nothing in the war, it seemed, ever really began for any particular reason, and nothing in the war ever really ended, at least as it concerned those still living and unwounded.”⁴⁴⁵ This blurring of beginnings and endings, followed Mark home from war. Mann’s play does not give us a strict timeline, only an occasional indication. One date we learn is that [Mark] came home from Vietnam in 1970. This date is significant for several reasons. Generally when people think about the war in Vietnam it is thought of as the war in the 1960s, but while that is somewhat true, the United States’ first involvement began in 1954 and

⁴⁴⁴ Stacewicz, Richard. *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997, ix. Stacewicz focused his interviews on veterans involved with the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

⁴⁴⁵ Beidler, 3.

did not end until 1974 and the war continued until 1975. Therefore, 1970 was towards the end, but also immediately following some of the more explosive times in the war. The Tet Offensive and My Lai massacre happened in 1968. The standard time for Army soldiers to serve in Vietnam was one year, but Marines—like Mark—toured for thirteen months, but some were there much shorter, while others were there much longer. It could be possible that [Mark] was in country as early as 1968, but we do know he returned in 1970. “When I got on the plane coming home I was so happy. I didn’t miss my gun then. It was my birthday. [...] I turned twenty-one. I did my birthday coming home,”⁴⁴⁶ Mark says. He felt great relief, knowing he was headed home,

I did my birthday across the date-line. I was incredibly happy. We hit Okinawa. R. J. was there. We saw all these guys who were just going over. [...] All these guys were asking us how it was. We were really getting off on the fact that we were done. These guys were so green and fat. We were brown, we were skinny. We were animals.⁴⁴⁷

How does a young soldier transition from late high school or early college life into war and then back into their parents’ home?

Parental relationships can be some of the most challenging to rebuild, repair, or reconnect after a son or daughter returns from war. Mark says, “I don’t know why I couldn’t talk to my parents when I got back.”⁴⁴⁸ Mark communicated often with his father while he was away, “I told my Dad everything when I was over there. ... The only way I could cry was to write to my dad. ‘God, Dad. I’m really scared. I’m really

⁴⁴⁶ Mann, 38.

⁴⁴⁷ Mann, 38.

⁴⁴⁸ Mann, 38.

terrified.' [...] When I sent somebody out and they got killed, I could tell my dad."⁴⁴⁹

Mark landed in Los Angeles, somewhat safe and somewhat sound, and he called his parents, "'Hey, I'm back. I'm back.' My Dad said: 'Oh, great. We're so relieved. I'm so happy.' My mother cried, she was happy. I said: 'I'm going to buy a hamburger.'"⁴⁵⁰

Mark went to get his hamburger and there he sat thinking, "'Hey, I'm back.' No one wanted anything to do with me. Fuckin' yellow ribbons. I thought I was tired."⁴⁵¹

The next morning, Mark took a flight and landed back home in Minnesota, "6:30 in the morning. Beautiful, beautiful day. Got my stuff, threw it over my shoulder, and started walking."⁴⁵² He eventually made it to his front door, "I walked in the door and set everything down. I was home. My dad looked at me, my mom looked at me. I sat down. Said: 'Could I have some coffee?' That's when my mother started raggin' on me about drinking coffee. The whole thing broke down."⁴⁵³ Mark tells this story a second time in the play as well, "I came home from a war, walked in the door, they didn't say anything. I asked for a cup of coffee, and my mother starts bitching at me about drinking coffee."⁴⁵⁴ This highlights the impact and importance of the moment of homecoming. After the coffee, Mark's mom continued to rag on him, "'you better get some sleep. I've got a lot to do.' I said: like I don't want to sleep. I got incredibly drunk. [...] My mom and dad had to go out that night. I thought, well, I'd sit down and talk with them at dinner. They were gone."⁴⁵⁵ Other than the initial conversation

⁴⁴⁹ Mann, 38.

⁴⁵⁰ Mann, 39.

⁴⁵¹ Mann, 39.

⁴⁵² Mann, 39.

⁴⁵³ Mann, 39.

⁴⁵⁴ Mann, 14.

⁴⁵⁵ Mann, 39.

about Mark's coffee drinking, he says, "We didn't see each other that day. We never really did see each other."⁴⁵⁶ Something changed, especially between Mark and his father, at least according to Nadine. She explains, "Do you know, to this day his father will not say the word Viet Nam. [...] But his father talked to everyone but Mark about the war. He's got his medals on the wall."⁴⁵⁷ Nadine's theory is that Mark's father also feels guilt, "His father's ashamed of himself. When you let your son go to war for all the wrong reasons, you can't face your son."⁴⁵⁸ Expectations change from pre- to post-war.

Mark's expectations of his homecoming were not matched with the reality of life after Vietnam. Like many veterans, Mark believed he was owed a job after the war. He served his country and now, he believed, it was time they served him. And when that did not happen, Mark was angry. He drank a lot and found himself in even more trouble, "And then I got in a position where I couldn't work because after I got busted and went to prison, no one would hire me. I did the whole drug thing from a real thought-out point of view. I was really highly decorated, awards, I was wounded twice. I really looked good."⁴⁵⁹ There are moments like this throughout in which Mark unleashes information without additional follow up or explanation. Tying back to earlier discussions of power and violence, these remain prevalent in Mark's life after returning home. The power Mark felt in Vietnam stayed with him. He explains, "I knew I could get away with a lot. I knew I could probably walk down the streets and kill somebody and I'd probably get off. Simply because of the war. I was

⁴⁵⁶ Mann, 40.

⁴⁵⁷ Mann, 36.

⁴⁵⁸ Mann, 37.

⁴⁵⁹ Mann, 28.

convinced of it.”⁴⁶⁰ Mark absolutely suffered from some form of PTSD, but he was also cognizant of his actions or potential actions and what the consequence, or lack thereof, would be. In his confession, Mark also says, “I’m just a regular guy. Alot [sic] of guys saw worse.”⁴⁶¹ While there is guilt, anxiety, and pride about service in the war there is also indifference. Mark recognizes that he suffered and made bad choices; he also knows that there are others that “saw worse.”

Mark never goes into detail about the abuse of his wife, but he does share other moments of violence post-war. He admits several times that he thought about killing people, not only that he could get away with it, but also actual contemplation about killing specific people that he would see or come across. One story he tells is of a party that Cheryl took him to before they were married. Mark says, “She was into seeing people who were into LSD. And I had tried a little acid this night, but I wasn’t too fucked-up. And we went to this party.”⁴⁶² There was a big guy there that was mad at another guy who “tried to rip him off, or something like that” and the big guy said, “get the fuck out of here or I’ll take this fucking baseball bat and split your head wide open.”⁴⁶³ Just like in battle, Mark began to assess the situation, figure out his options and “In a split second, I knew I could have him. He had a baseball bat, but there was one of those long glass coke bottles. I knew...okay, I grabbed that. I moved toward him, to stick it in his face. I mean, I killed him. I mean in my mind. I cut his throat and everything.”⁴⁶⁴ Luckily for the big guy, and for Mark, Cheryl saw the

⁴⁶⁰ Mann, 29.

⁴⁶¹ Mann, 47.

⁴⁶² Mann, 29.

⁴⁶³ Mann, 29.

⁴⁶⁴ Mann, 29.

anger rising in Mark and his move to grab the bottle and she was able to stop him. He sat in tension the rest of the evening, the anger did not leave him even after they went home. The next day Cheryl tried to explain to him that his behavior is not acceptable. She told him, "You're not over there anymore. Settle down, it's all right," and it was over.⁴⁶⁵ This is similar to D.J. reactions in *Medal of Honor Rag*—the violence present in the mind and/or body that remains after coming home from war. And while Cheryl sees him at his worst, Nadine only sees him (by choice or fact) at his best. Nadine says, "I have yet to hear him say anything bad about anyone; even those terrible people he had to deal with in the jungle."⁴⁶⁶ This reference to jungle continues the theme of Mark's animal-like nature. In scene three the only dialogue that occurs is Mark's awareness of this fact. "You'd really become an animal out there. R.J. and I knew what we were doing. That's why a lot of other kids really got into trouble. They didn't know what they were doing. We knew it, we dug it, we knew we were very good."⁴⁶⁷ Nadine believes that Mark "survived *because* he became an animal. I hope I would have wanted to live that bad."⁴⁶⁸ But did this animal instinct, survival mentally turn Mark into a different man when he returned home?

Past Productions

An important dramaturgical resource for plays that have previously been produced is the production review. This provides a look into how the play has been

⁴⁶⁵ Mann, 30.

⁴⁶⁶ Mann, 35.

⁴⁶⁷ Mann, 32.

⁴⁶⁸ Mann, 38.

produced and how audiences responded to it. As Marvin Carlson notes in his article, “Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance,” the dramaturg and reviewer are “near relative[s],” the dramaturg from the theatre and the reviewer from the audience.⁴⁶⁹ Both the dramaturg and the reviewer aim to navigate the space between the performance and the audience. Even though, these reviews are the strict opinion of one person, the reviewer; they still offer a glimpse of the production. Often this affords this individual, the reviewer, the power to tell, or at least suggest, to potential audiences whether or not they should attend a production. *Still Life* premiered at the Goodman Studio Theater in Chicago during the fall of 1980. *Chicago Tribune* sent a reviewer, Larry Kart to review the Goodman production. On October 28, 1980 Kart’s review was printed: “‘Still Life’ lecture-play may be ‘real,’ but it sure isn’t art.” As Kart’s title indicates, the review is almost entirely negative. He argues, “For the next 90 minutes they talk about their lives—largely to the audience, rarely to each other—trying to trace their current griefs back to the Viet Nam war [sic] with an extended side trip into the realm of feminism. And the results, like most lectures, are desperately dull.”⁴⁷⁰ In these two sentences Kart delivers objective information—length of production, direct address format, content and subject matter—and his opinion that it was “desperately dull.” Kart experienced the play in the singular way that Mann was explicitly trying to avoid: a lecture. This review also presents information, which was seemingly in the program

⁴⁶⁹ Carlson, Marvin. “Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance.” *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989, 94.

⁴⁷⁰ Kart, Larry. “‘Still Life’ lecture-play may be ‘real,’ but it sure isn’t art.” *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago, IL. October 28, 1980.

for this event, “But wait a minute. ‘Still Life,’ it says here, is a ‘docudrama,’ a theatrical event that has special claims to the truth, since ‘for the most part, these are the people’s own words as told to Emily Mann during the summer of 1978.’”⁴⁷¹ *Still Life* was by no means the first docudrama to be presented on the stage and it is clear from Kart’s explanation that he is not entirely a fan of that particular brand of storytelling. He notes that while the words are real and truthful the presentation, of course, is not. Kart warns, “That is, the horrors of war Mark says he participated in and even enjoyed were actually experienced by a real, unnamed ex-marine.”⁴⁷² This is a pointed remark on representations of veterans on stage. Kart is indicating to the fact that the honesty, the pain, the confession all belong to a man that remains unknown and unnamed to the audience and in a way questions how truthful that representation can be.

Kart acknowledges that this kind of judgment can be treacherous when he questions, “So how then dare we regard this bleeding chunk of ‘real life’ as anything but real? If we judge it to be dull, are we not passing judgment on ourselves, confessing our failure to confront the reality of the issues that Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine are confronting?”⁴⁷³ Again, as Nadine said in the play, “You know, all Mark did was...he brought the war back home and none of us could look at it.”⁴⁷⁴ This play, due to its documentary theatre form is inherently fiction and non-fiction. The non-fiction element remains within the real people that Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine represent. *Still Life* is a snapshot into their lives, their stories, their struggles, and

⁴⁷¹ Kart.

⁴⁷² Kart.

⁴⁷³ Kart.

⁴⁷⁴ Mann, 40.

most importantly, their reality. Kart recognizes that to call their story dull, as he does, is in turn calling the reality of their situation dull. It is within this blurred line between reality and fiction that Kart says *Still Life* fails “since the play conveys not the reality of anyone’s ‘own words’ but the generally futile attempt of Mann and her performers to bring those words to life onstage.”⁴⁷⁵ Kart points to a specific element of the play that may cause this failure, in his opinion, “There is, for one thing, the basic problem of transferring language that was spoken to an interviewer into language that is spoken to an audience.”⁴⁷⁶ This is a complicated task for any documentary theatre playwright, to communicate the tone, feeling, and emotion from the interview room to the stage. Kart feels *Still Life* has failed at its mission—Mann was striving to tell a real story theatrically and creatively. The goal of documentary theatre is to create theatre that “consciously engages its many performative and creative tools” in order to “move us beyond a merely fact-bearing exercise.”⁴⁷⁷ Documentary theatre strives to “engage the spectator on an emotional and affective level so that the particular circumstances of the past may be illuminated.”⁴⁷⁸ The language, according to Kart’s review, “imprisons” *Still Life*, “While the reality of their pain cannot be questioned, they spoke of it to Mann in such cliché-ridden terms that ‘Still Life’ expresses what they must have felt.”⁴⁷⁹ Clichés or not, the words remain with those who spoke them, the real people represented by Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine.

⁴⁷⁵ Kart.

⁴⁷⁶ Kart.

⁴⁷⁷ Forsyth, Alison. Ed. *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Testimonial Plays*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 1-2.

⁴⁷⁸ Forsyth, 2.

⁴⁷⁹ Kart.

Soon after its premiere in Chicago, *Still Life* moved to the American Place Theater in New York in February 1981. Frank Rich reviewed this production for the *New York Times* on February 20, 1981. Rich begins his review with how Mann's play "aspires" to be a tale of the aftermath of Vietnam and how her "heart seems to be in the right place," but yet the play does not meet these expectations.⁴⁸⁰ Due to Mann's "fuzzy-headed writing," Rich suggests the play "not only leaves the audience cold, but also tends to trivialize such issues as the plight of the Vietnam veteran, war atrocities and feminism. Good intentions, I'm afraid, don't stand a chance in the face of sheer incompetence."⁴⁸¹ Rich's review continues on for another 700+ words, but he does not specify how the play trivializes these issues, but he does take up a point of contention with the documentary format, similarly to Kart's. Rich writes, "Miss Mann has given 'Still Life' a documentary format, as if that might excuse her inability to select or think through her material."⁴⁸² Like Kart, he also cites the program, "According to the program, the words we hear are, 'for the most part,' based on interviews with real people."⁴⁸³ Kart and Rich both seem to be hung up on the use of real dialogue provided by the people Mann interviewed, or perhaps their issue is contained within the "for the most part" preface. Rich's review not only attacks the play, but Mann herself as the playwright and director, "Though Miss Mann, who also directed, occasionally allows her capable actors to stretch their legs, her play's title

⁴⁸⁰ Rich, Frank. "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place." *New York Times*. New York, NY. February 20, 1981.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/20/theater/stage-still-life-by-emily-mann-at-american-place.html>

⁴⁸¹ Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

⁴⁸² Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

⁴⁸³ Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

all too literally describes its method.”⁴⁸⁴ The technique of direct address that Mann employs causes too much stillness for Rich. Perhaps it was the context of other plays and musicals being produced on Broadway in 1981 that Rich compares the stillness of *Still Life* to, including *Pirates of Penzance*, *Brigadoon*, and *The Music Man* among others.

Rich then moves to characters, which inherently also includes the real people they represent. Rich asserts that Mann wants the audience to “understand” the characters as well as “sympathize” with them, “but only the abused and abandoned Cheryl arouses an iota of compassion. Mark and Nadine are, respectively, contemptible and silly, at least as presented by the playwright.”⁴⁸⁵ This statement says something about Rich’s personal feeling towards abused women citing that Cheryl only “arouses an iota of compassion.”⁴⁸⁶ Later in the review he describes Nadine “as a laudable, self-made feminist activist, but she comes across as a nasty parody of one.”⁴⁸⁷ Those that have read *Still Life*, I would argue, would not consider Mark contemptible and definitely not silly nor is Nadine a parody of a feminist. That is not to say the characters are perfectly written, nor it is to say that they do not deserve some scrutiny, but Rich describes them in a way that makes *Still Life* out to be some poorly written comedy. Mark, and the women, cannot be separated from who they represent—real people who lived these real experiences—which includes the good, the bad, and the ugly of their lives. In life, [Mark] was a troubled man, who

⁴⁸⁴ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

⁴⁸⁵ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

⁴⁸⁶ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

⁴⁸⁷ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

within the play does confess to killing a Vietnamese family and then returned home and beat his wife.

Rich writes, "Throughout the evening he [Mark] delivers teary mea culpas and boasts of his love for Vietnamese children, and yet the fact remains that he is, by any standard, including Nuremberg's, a war criminal."⁴⁸⁸ Mark mentions throughout the play his interest in and love for the Vietnamese children. He shows a picture of himself and some children, "Here's a picture of me...And some kids. God I LOVED those kids."⁴⁸⁹ Later Mark shows another picture, "This is a picture of some kids who were hurt. I used to take care of them, change their bandages and shit. I loved these kids. Oh, God..." as he trails off.⁴⁹⁰ Rich struggles to see Mark as anything but a war criminal and he finds it hard to accept him as any kind of representation of Vietnam veterans.⁴⁹¹ But this rejection is problematic because Mark is a literal representation of a real Vietnam veteran. Is he a stand in for the whole? No. But I would argue that Mark is not the only veteran who made awful decisions, took the lives of innocent people, and returned home, broken, and continued to propagate violence. Rich makes a comparison between Mark and First Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr., who was found guilty of murdering twenty-two unarmed Vietnamese civilians during the My Lai Massacre in March 1968.

The play is not meant to speak of all veterans of the war in Vietnam, but it is meant to represent and share this one man's story and the story of the women in his

⁴⁸⁸ Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place." Referencing the Nuremberg trials where German officers were charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

⁴⁸⁹ Mann, 27.

⁴⁹⁰ Mann, 43.

⁴⁹¹ Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

life during that time. Rich desires something more from Mark, "If Miss Mann wanted to dramatize the tragic readjustment traumas of the veterans, why didn't she pick one who has a genuine right to his bitterness and rage? Unlike most of his peers, Mark is a villain of Vietnam, not a victim."⁴⁹² Mark is arguably both a villain (though the word choice is extreme) and a victim, not only a villain as Rich would suggest. Sturken notes, in reference to films, but could also be applied to plays as "the politics of gender and race surrounding the war are represented and rescripted; the myths about the war are established, questioned, and replaced with new myths; and the primary representation of the Vietnam veteran is constructed."⁴⁹³ Mann's representation and creative construction of Mark highlights the image of a veteran that we cannot forget. It forces audiences to struggle, like Rich does, to understand Mark. I do not believe that Mann's goal was to represent a man that at the end of the play we sympathize with. Mark is not meant to be Willy Loman, nor the devil in disguise. Rich guesses at what he thinks might be Mann's purpose, "Maybe Miss Mann really wants us to loathe Mark and Nadine, but the evening is too self-contradictory to support any firm conclusion."⁴⁹⁴ It seems as though the entire premise of the play and performance confuses Rich. He explains, "Even the play's static format—is this a news conference? a group therapy session?—is confused. The characters usually deliver their interwoven monologues independently of one another but sometimes interact—thereby violating the playwright's gimmick,

⁴⁹² Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

⁴⁹³ Sturken, 86.

⁴⁹⁴ Rich, "'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place."

whatever it may mean.”⁴⁹⁵ Perhaps Rich’s confusion is due to the nature of documentary theatre, which asks more questions than it answers. Its form requires more from audiences than a traditional plot structure. Rich cites the climax of the play when Mark bangs on the table and shouts, “War kills people!” and writes, “If that, at last, is the real and banal point of this exercise, Miss Mann has certainly reached it by the most ridiculous possible route.”⁴⁹⁶ But is not that exactly Mann’s point? War kills people. Perhaps it is banal and ridiculous, but it is the truth. War kills people. It is a reminder to those in the audience watching and listening of the over 58,000 American lives lost in the war in Vietnam. It is also a reminder that war “kills” people after the war too. Military men and women suffer from PTSD and consider suicide after returning home. It is a call to action—to listen and to speak about the tragedy in Vietnam and its continual impact on the United States, which is precisely one goal of documentary theatre to function as a catalyst for social change.⁴⁹⁷

The emphasis on communicating about the incommunicable is at the heart of Mann’s work. As Dawson discusses documentary theatre as “The simple idea that words heal will be as operative tomorrow as it is poignant today.”⁴⁹⁸ Audiences continue to go to the theatre because they want to hear, see, and speak about what it means to be a human. Cathy Caruth, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, discusses the importance and relationship between speaking and listening, like the structure and form of *Still Life*, “This speaking and this listening—a speaking and a listening

⁴⁹⁵ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

⁴⁹⁶ Rich, “‘Still Life’ by Emily Mann at American Place.”

⁴⁹⁷ Dawson, 162.

⁴⁹⁸ Dawson, 162.

from the site of trauma—does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own traumatic pasts."⁴⁹⁹ The war is part of our traumatic past as a nation and Mann attempts to remind us of that fact. Caruth continues, "In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves."⁵⁰⁰ Traumas force us to see, to hear, and to respond to the trauma and those connected to it, like the veteran.

There have been many, many productions of *Still Life* after its run at the American Place Theater. It has been performed at the Arena Stage (1983), The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis (1985), Lost Nation Theater (1987), San Diego Rep (1991), back to Chicago at the Pegasus Theatre (2006), a 25th anniversary production at the 78th Street Theatre Lab (2007), and many others. Dawson notes, "When a documentary play works, it does so because it moves the conversation about its subject matter from a state of entropy to a higher level of activation energy and discourse."⁵⁰¹ Therefore, despite critics loving or hating, theatres continue to find value in Mann's work and *Still Life* continues to get produced. James Reston, Jr., writes, "The theatre is not at its best when it attempts to reproduce history or contemporary politics, but rather when it presents a *concept* of history against which the audience can test its own perceptions. The stage can humanize history

⁴⁹⁹ Caruth, 11.

⁵⁰⁰ Caruth, 11.

⁵⁰¹ Dawson, xii.

and bring it alive, while professional historians and television are dehumanizing.”⁵⁰²

Perhaps it is the form that draws people to *Still Life*, but I like to believe that it is the story of the veteran that people recognize as a story that needs to be told and as a way to humanize the war in Vietnam.

Conclusion

In one of the last scenes of the play, Nadine tells the audience, “But Mark has become a conscience for me—through him—I’ve come to understand the violence in myself...and in him, and in all of us.”⁵⁰³ Quickly thereafter, Mark says, “See, I didn’t want to see people going through another era of being so ignorant of the fact that war kills people.”⁵⁰⁴ As I discussed earlier, perhaps this is Mark’s message: war kills people. It is easy for a country, like the U.S., to talk about battling for what’s right, but we must constantly ask ourselves—at what cost? Towards the end of the play Mark says, “I DEDICATE...this evening to my friends...I’d like a roll call for my friends who died.”⁵⁰⁵

Anderson, Robert
Dafoe, Mark
Dawson, Mark.
Fogel, Barry.
Grant, Tommy
Gunther, Bobby
Heinz, Jerry.
Jastrow, Alan. Lawrence, Gordon. Mullen, Clifford.
Nelson, Raymond.
Nedelski, Michael.
Nevin, Daniel.
O’Brien, Stephen.
Rosiello, Daniel.

⁵⁰² Reston, Jr., xii.

⁵⁰³ Mann, 47.

⁵⁰⁴ Mann, 47.

⁵⁰⁵ Mann, 48

Rogers, John.
Ryan, John.
Sawyer, Steven.
Simon, Jimmy.
Skanolon, John.
Spaulding, Henry.
Stanton, Ray.
Vecchio, Michael.
Walker...R.J.⁵⁰⁶

The names Mark reads intertwine with Nadine and Cheryl's lines as they question, judge, and wonder what comes next for them.

Historians, politicians, and veterans of the war in Vietnam often write of the lessons learned in Vietnam. They discuss what we have learned as a nation and ways to avoid the mistakes made. Reston, Jr. argues that perhaps the real lessons lie in "what happened to one generation of Americans. The Vietnam generation is unique in American history. The choices it faced, the manner in which it dealt with those choices, the problems it faced in the aftermath: that is the story of Vietnam. Only in dealing with that can the country come to terms with the war."⁵⁰⁷ Maybe we have come to terms with the war or maybe we have decided to never come to terms with it. Regardless, it is the memories of the veterans that need to continue to be told. Of memory, Sturken maintains, "Memory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions. We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present."⁵⁰⁸ What can we learn from the veterans?

⁵⁰⁶ Mann, 48-50. The names listed here are fictional names.

⁵⁰⁷ Reston, Jr., ix.

⁵⁰⁸ Sturken, 2.

What desires and needs can be met? Mark ends the play, “What can I say? I am still alive—my friends aren’t. It’s a still-life. I didn’t know what I was doing.”⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁹ Mann, 50.

Chapter 3: *Tracers* by John DiFusco, and Vincent Caristi, Richard Chaves, Eric E. Emerson, Rick Gallavan, Merlin Marston, Harry Stephens, and Sheldon Lettich

[M]any of those who went to Vietnam had the equipment to turn their experiences into literary documents. And many others would, upon return, gain the skills needed to shape and reshape their memories.

—Philip Jason, *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*

The final play of this project is the only play of the three that was written by veterans. As Cinda Gillilan writes in “‘Tracers’: This is Our Parade A First Look at an Understudied Vietnam Drama,” the play is based on the “actors’ personal experiences—if not always literally true—*Tracers* provides snapshots from the lives of Vietnam veterans as they journey through psychological minefields of war and its aftermath.”⁵¹⁰ According to Toby Zinman in “Search and Destroy: The Drama of the Vietnam War,” Vietnam War playwrights who are also veterans frontload their plays with their own experience in the service. It is as though “to underscore what character after character says in film after novel after play: if you were not there, you cannot even imagine what it was like.”⁵¹¹ Zinman also notes, that there are distinct differences between Vietnam War plays that are written by veterans and those that are written by civilians. Zinman adds,

[P]lays by veterans are often about combat or training for combat; their action is more brutal, their language more savage, their rage more palpable. [...] The plays by civilian playwrights often deal with the returned veteran who must come to terms with the damage Vietnam did to his psyche (and,

⁵¹⁰ Gillilan, Cinda. “‘Tracers’: This is Our Parade A First Look at an Understudied Vietnam Drama.” *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. Vol. 8, No. 3. (Fall 1996): 60.

⁵¹¹ Zinman, Toby Silverman. “Search and Destroy: The Drama of the Vietnam War.” *Theatre Journal*. Vol. 42, No. 1. (Mar. 1990): 7.

less often, his body) if he is to be able to live at all. This is the perspective on the war nonveterans are much more likely to have and to identify with.⁵¹²

These differences are seen in *Still Life* and *Medal of Honor Rag*, written by civilians, and *Tracers*, written by a group of veterans.

My dramaturgical approach to *Tracers* was similar to that of *Still Life*, which draws on Mann's own relationship to the war and *Medal of Honor Rag*, which addresses the mental state of the veteran. DiFusco's play touches on the consistent themes—wounding, coming home, and commemorating—as well as themes of music, women, sex, PTSD (specifically suicide), military training, and dreams.

John DiFusco: Veteran as Playwright

Each veteran has a unique path into the military and John DiFusco is no different. I had the opportunity to speak with DiFusco on June 22, 2015. DiFusco volunteered for the Air Force when he was 18 years old. I asked him, "Why did you volunteer?" and his answer was simple, "It's all tradition."⁵¹³ DiFusco was born in 1947 and grew up in a small town: Webster, Massachusetts. He told me he did not know a lot about what was happening in Vietnam, but that he knew some boys who went and who came back "injured and crazy."⁵¹⁴ Like many of the men of his generation, DiFusco was surrounded by fathers, uncles, and grandfathers that served in World War II. Therefore joining the military seemed "normal" or perhaps even expected. DiFusco grew up around American Legions and VFWs. When it came time for him to think about life after high school he figured he might as well join up. So, in February 1966, he did. "It was the combination of getting to see the world,

⁵¹² Zinman, 7.

⁵¹³ John DiFusco.

⁵¹⁴ John DiFusco.

getting an education, and a calling to escape the nest. The idea of dying never occurred to me,” he explained to me.⁵¹⁵ This is not an uncommon thought. For many veterans, especially those who served during the war in Vietnam, death was not at the forefront of their minds. Young men saw the military as an opportunity to get away from home or as an alternative to college; it was not viewed as a means to quicken death. DiFusco, like many men his age, wanted to be a part of something, “Someday this is going to be history. And I want to be able to say I was there.”⁵¹⁶ This generation of men saw their fathers returning from World War II to Victory Parades, witnessed the camaraderie at the VFW, and sought their own means of creating a community connected to the military.

DiFusco was stationed in Texas for basic training. In basic training, he took aptitude tests and filled out a lot of forms to figure out what his job might be in the Air Force. There were numerous options for jobs, but DiFusco selected two that he was interested in: photographer and medic. He received his scores from the aptitude test and though his lowest score was in mechanics he was assigned to be a mechanic, not a photographer or medic. “I joined to escape that kind of work,” he said, laughing.⁵¹⁷ His hope was to do something he could not do “back home.” DiFusco expresses his concern about his placement to an officer and he was given an opportunity to *volunteer*, as opposed to being assigned, for a different job. He chose security police (also referred to as “military police” or “MP”) where he would guard planes, work the gate at the base, and other security duties. Surprisingly, DiFusco liked the job,

⁵¹⁵ John DiFusco.

⁵¹⁶ John DiFusco.

⁵¹⁷ John DiFusco.

but at some point he got bored with Texas and was ready for the next step in his military career. Working in a radar site “the threat was that you might get sent to North Dakota. (*Laughs.*) I thought, ‘I don’t want to go there so I volunteered for Vietnam.’”⁵¹⁸ Adventure and danger outweighed safety and fear for DiFusco. He was ready for an adventure. He knew that he was putting himself in some danger, but he was ready and willing. Within a month, he got his orders for Vietnam.

He went to Vietnam on November 4, 1967 and when he arrived, someone was there to show him the ropes and teach him the lingo. That seemed to be standard practice, to get the F.N.G.’s (fucking new guys) up to speed. In *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era*, J.W. Fenn describes this experience, “The recruit is stripped of his pre-military identity, programmed with new criteria of desirable behavior, and in essence is acculturated to a new social order predicated on a cultural mythology separate and distinct from that of the civilian world.”⁵¹⁹ Keeping track of his personal identity was a challenge for DiFusco, as it was for many as they arrived in Vietnam. I asked DiFusco to describe his personal experience arriving in Vietnam, “It’s a completely different world from state-side service. Rougher, edgier, *so* different. Especially for those of us that were so young. My personal experience, well, it wasn’t *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), but it also wasn’t *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987).”⁵²⁰

DiFusco is by no means the first Vietnam veteran to use Vietnam War films as a comparison point for their experience, especially when speaking to a civilian.

⁵¹⁸ John DiFusco.

⁵¹⁹ Fenn, 138.

⁵²⁰ John DiFusco.

Sturken contends, “The personal memories of Vietnam veterans are merged with the cultural memories produced by documentary images of the war and then reinscribed in narrative cinematic representations that make claims to history.”⁵²¹ The images from Vietnam War films are often ingrained in the memory of the viewer. Vietnam War films have functioned, even if not intentionally, as connective images between the war in Vietnam and U.S. civilians. The visuals seen in these films and others create mythic images of the Vietnam War. These films include *The Green Berets*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven & Earth*, and more. One of the most common examples is the image of the helicopters in *Apocalypse Now*. This image of the helicopters is tied to the war, the film, and the song “Ride of the Valkyries” from Wagner’s opera *The Valkyrie* (1870). The use of this song replaces the sixties tunes that had previously been serving as a backdrop in order to “scare the hell out of the slopes” as if the sound of helicopters was not terrifying enough.⁵²² When typing “Ride of the Valkyries” into Google it suggests “Ride of the Valkyries Vietnam” and “Ride of the Valkyries *Apocalypse Now*.” From “Ride of the Valkyries” to the sound of helicopters to images of napalm hitting the trees, *Apocalypse Now* carries iconic representations of the media’s image (and sound) of the war. Some veterans attempt to separate themselves from images seen in Vietnam War films. Others like DiFusco rely on them as a touchstone for comparison and understanding. In *American Myth, American Reality* James Oliver Robertson suggests, “Some histories are elaborate efforts to debunk myths through

⁵²¹ Sturken, 121.

⁵²² *Apocalypse Now*. “Slopes” is a derogatory term for Asian people referencing the slanted or “sloped” shape of the eye.

logic or research. But the debunked myths seem to pop up again, the stories continue to be told and the rituals re-enacted. The vivid imagery of the myths continues to appeal to Americans.”⁵²³ Myth does not imply fiction or falseness, but instead perhaps an exaggeration or conflation. We do not rely on films to show the accuracy of the veteran experience in Vietnam, but as a means for storytelling and connecting with audiences. In this way, these “myths” presented in film and theatre (in regards to the war) become vital tools.

Michael Herr, American writer and war correspondent in Vietnam, wrote the screenplay with Gustav Hasford for *Full Metal Jacket* based on Hasford’s novel *The Short-Timers* (1979) that follows Marine platoons in training and combat. This film, *Full Metal Jacket*, shows the severity of the mental impact of military training as well as the war itself. Arguably, the most graphic and memorable moment in the film is when the character, nicknamed “Pyle” (for Gomer Pyle), kills the drill sergeant and then takes his own life. After witnessing this “Joker” (another character and nickname) struggles throughout the rest of the film and he is torn between his job as a soldier/journalist and his desire for peace. *Good Morning, Vietnam*, on the other hand, is the only comedic Vietnam War film with Robin Williams performing as a radio DJ for the Armed Forces. DiFusco’s quote is an attempt to provide common cultural references and place himself and his experience in-between the two extremes of these films. DiFusco recognized the danger, he was even shot at, but nothing much happened when he first arrived. He was in Vietnam during the Tet

⁵²³ Robertson, 20.

Offensive, which he described as “a wake-up call.”⁵²⁴ The Tet Offensive is continually marked as a turning point in the war.

Unlike many others, DiFusco returned home safely later in November 1968. For his service, DiFusco earned the United States Air Force Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service. Commendation Medals are given throughout each branch of the U.S. military for acts of heroism or meritorious service. During his time in Vietnam, DiFusco was never injured. He told me, “Early on when I first came back, I met guys who say the same thing as me—nothing seemed real.”⁵²⁵ His first impulse was to return, but “That faded eventually, but I definitely wanted to go back.”⁵²⁶ So many people were joining the Air Force that it became over populated, according to DiFusco, and because of that he got an early out, part of the reason he wanted to return. He felt as though he had not fully served his time, but his focus quickly shifted to college. He explained, “I wanted to hang out with someone who had any college education. I wanted to get an education. I had a dream to become educated.”⁵²⁷ He attended Riverside City College from 1971 to 1973, California State University—Long Beach from 1973-1974, and California State University—Dominguez Hills from 1974 to 1975.⁵²⁸ DiFusco was searching for an artistic outlet. He toyed with the idea of writing poetry. He was inspired by people like Bob Dylan and Marlon Brando and decided to major in theatre. “I became anti-war like everyone else around me. Vets just found each other on campus. There was

⁵²⁴ John DiFusco.

⁵²⁵ John DiFusco.

⁵²⁶ John DiFusco.

⁵²⁷ John DiFusco.

⁵²⁸ John DiFusco.

something about us—a darker edge, older than most, etc.,” he said.⁵²⁹ Even though he was committed to school, he continued to think about the men who were still in Vietnam. It was this constant reminder that led to the creation of *Tracers*.

Tracers was conceived by DiFusco, but developed with the help of other actors, all of who are Vietnam veterans: Vincent Caristi, Richard Chaves, Eric E. Emerson, Rick Gallavan, Merlin Marston, Harry Stephens, and one writer, Sheldon Lettich. Each of the actors are presented in the story and called by the nicknames they had in the service or a variation of that nickname. The nicknames are as follows: John DiFusco—Doc, Vincent Caristi—Baby San, Richard Chaves—Dinky Dau, Eric E. Emerson—Habu, Rick Gallavan—Scooter, Merlin Marston—Little John, and Harry Stephens—Professor. In March 1980, DiFusco took out an ad for actor-veterans in *Drama-Logue* and in April 1980, DiFusco organized and led workshops with the intent to create a play. DiFusco did not really know what he was going to create, but he held auditions. About twenty-five actors, who were also veterans, auditioned. “I didn’t know where it was going to go, but I had ignited something powerful,” he explained.⁵³⁰ The workshops consisted of a variety of techniques, activities, and group work including improvisation, rap sessions, psychodrama, physical work, and ensemble work.⁵³¹ DiFusco and Lettich were the two that stitched it all together and made the necessary edits. He explained, “When I began the work, formed the group, and started to create the play I wasn’t aware of the

⁵²⁹ John DiFusco.

⁵³⁰ John DiFusco.

⁵³¹ DiFusco, John and Vincent Caristi, Richard Chaves, Eric E. Emerson, Rick Gallavan, Merlin Marston, Harry Stephens, and Sheldon Lettich. *Tracers*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, 8.

movement that was developing around the country” (meaning others across the U.S. were creating works of art in response to the war).⁵³² DiFusco wanted and needed people to know that the experiences of the veterans were real, “It was and is real to me.”⁵³³ One of the challenges of crafting the narrative of the play was the ambiguity of time and place. The men involved were from numerous branches of the military and had served at various times throughout the war therefore setting the play in a certain branch or a certain time would make the play untruthful for some of those involved. The war was different pre and post-1968. Some soldiers were heavily involved in drugs, others including DiFusco, were not. This is true of most veterans who served in this twenty-year war. Myra MacPherson describes Vietnam as a,

[S]wirling, ever-changing place that in itself defies a simple common shared experience. Veterans who saw heavy combat and those who saw little do not speak the same language. Nor do those who went in 1964, when the country was moving through the long twilight of cold war containment, have much of a bond with the reluctant draftee who went to a hot and futile war in 1970.⁵³⁴

DiFusco decided to blur the lines. He wanted to make it as clear as possible that it was about the ensemble, that there was no protagonist or antagonist. DiFusco compares it to a Greek chorus, “I didn’t think about that at the time, but I realized it later. I created a kind of ritual and physical work similar to theatres like the Living Theatre or the Open Theatre.”⁵³⁵ In addition, there were certain themes he wanted to address in the play. There is repetition of “killing” and an attitude of “don’t fuck

⁵³² John DiFusco.

⁵³³ John DiFusco.

⁵³⁴ MacPherson, 6.

⁵³⁵ John DiFusco. The Living Theatre was founded in 1947 in New York City, which was greatly influenced by the work of Antonin Artaud as a means for dissolving the space between the audience and the performance. The Open Theatre was active in for about ten years in the 1960s and 1970s and began with help from Joseph Chaikin who had been a member of The Living Theatre.

with me,” according to DiFusco.⁵³⁶ Structurally, he worked to create an emotional response. Throughout our conversation he compared *Tracers* to a concert. He explained, “I used to go to a lot of concerts. So the structure is loosely based on that—play a couple of hits, big finish, encore. Laugh, cry, laugh, cry, laugh, cry.”⁵³⁷ The structure is also compared to other Vietnam War stories including Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977) and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). These two books are among the most commonly mentioned books when discussing Vietnam stories told from the first person perspective. One major difference between the two is that Herr was a reporter and O’Brien was a soldier. Another major difference is Herr’s writing has a definite political agenda attached, which made him controversial, while O’Brien claims to not be interested in the politics of the war, but more in the sharing of war stories/experiences. Both are a great comparison to *Tracers*.

Herr, who originally worked for *Esquire* magazine, wrote his book based on his experience as a Vietnam reporter. It is his version of a memoir of his Vietnam War experience. After the success of *Dispatches*, Herr contributed to the screenwriting and narration of *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, as I wrote earlier.⁵³⁸ At the time it was published, the book was hailed as one of the best books written about the war and the soldiers’ experience. A more recent analysis of the book questions some of Herr’s intentions and storytelling. After reading *Dispatches*,

⁵³⁶ John DiFusco.

⁵³⁷ John DiFusco.

⁵³⁸ Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York: Vintage International, 1968. Some suggest that the character of Hopper, in *Apocalypse Now* is shaped by Herr’s experiences as a war correspondent.

it is not difficult to locate the connection between Herr and the style of dialogue in these films and in DiFusco's play. The book and the play both have a dream-like quality. Similar to *Tracers*, Herr provides limited facts of location, dates, battle details, etc. Instead he focuses more on how the reader should feel about what is being shared. Similar to *Tracers*, it also lacks a linear structure. Herr's own experiences in Vietnam as a war correspondent shaped not only his view of the war, but also how he presents the war to readers and audiences through multiple forms of media. Herr recalled (as cited by Nora Alter in *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage*), "Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it."⁵³⁹ Both the war and the "telling" of the war were unconventional.

The relationship United States citizens had to the Vietnam War and the type of men and women present there was unlike previous wars because of the draft. Herr, like those who fought, had to find a way to separate themselves from their experiences. The threat of danger was continually present, according to Herr,

You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional, that early death, blindness, loss of legs, arms or balls, major and lasting disfigurement—the whole rotten deal—could come in on the freakyfluky as easily as in the so-called expected ways, you heard so many of those stories it was a wonder anyone was left alive to die in firefights and mortar-rocket attacks.⁵⁴⁰

And because of the constant threat of death, Herr was better able to understand the mental state of the soldier, which he expressed in *Dispatches*. Soldiers, reporters, and photojournalists had no choice except to survive through whatever means

⁵³⁹ Alter, 27.

⁵⁴⁰ Herr, *Dispatches*, 14.

possible. The telling of stories allowed for veterans to share their experience while also providing self-healing. As Reston, Jr. explains,

The novels, the plays, the painting and sculpture, the poetry—these all go to the emotional truth of the experience, and when they are good they are worth more than a mountain of books on the military campaigns or the chief political figures or the chapter-and-verse facts about an era.⁵⁴¹

This way of communicating the war—through writing and performance—provides additional perspectives to the war in Vietnam.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was written long after both O'Brien's service and the war. In an interview O'Brien said, "I carry the memories of the ghosts of a place called Vietnam—the people of Vietnam, my fellow soldiers. More importantly, I carry the weight of the responsibility and a sense of abiding guilt."⁵⁴² The title and O'Brien's response to this interviewer on NPR show the mental items that he carries with him, but the title also has a literal meaning in the book. The things they carried included food, weapons, dry socks, etc. The book is a collection of short stories that came from O'Brien's experience in Vietnam. Professor at Central Michigan University, Jill Taft-Kaufman's article "How to Tell a True War Story: The Dramaturgy and Staging of Narrative Theatre," addresses O'Brien's book and how the audience is implied in the writing. Taft-Kaufman proposes the idea that the novel is about "storytelling affects teller and listener. The book draws the audience into an exploration of how the mind shapes experience in order to deal with death and loss, particularly in war."⁵⁴³ But one of the unique qualities of O'Brien's book is

⁵⁴¹ Reston, Jr., ix.

⁵⁴² Conan, Neal. "'The Things They Carried,' 20 Years On." NPR Books. March 24, 2010. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125128156>

⁵⁴³ Taft-Kaufman, Jill. "How to Tell a True War Story: The Dramaturgy and Staging of

that it can live in both the non-fiction and fiction sections of the library as many of the stories are truthful, but details have been changed or dramatized just as DiFusco has done with *Tracers*. It is unclear, through reading, which elements are entirely accurate and which ones are dramatized. Author and Professor, Eric Schroeder interviewed several Vietnam War writers including Herr and O'Brien. In his interview with O'Brien, he asked about the mixing of fiction with non-fiction. O'Brien answered, "It's not lying. It's trying to produce story detail which will somehow get a felt experience. [...] Memory and imagination as devices of survival apply to all of us whether we are in a war situation or not."⁵⁴⁴ For O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* was an exercise in storytelling.⁵⁴⁵ O'Brien speaks often of memory and remembering in reference to his book and in the book itself, but "the thing about remembering is that you don't forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present."⁵⁴⁶ This same intersection of past and present is where DiFusco positions *Tracers*.

The first few months of creating *Tracers* were done in complete privacy, no outsiders were allowed into the process. But on July 4, 1980 the group did an in-progress performance at the Odyssey Theatre in Los Angeles for invited guests only. While the play was a collaborative project, DiFusco took the lead to serve as director. After the July 4 performance they recruited Deborah Barylski to serve as an assistant director. By October 1980, the overall structure of the play was complete including order of scenes, music, final edits, etc. Finally, after six months of

Narrative Theatre." *Theatre Topics*. Vol. 10, No. 1. (Mar. 2000): 23.

⁵⁴⁴ Schroeder, 131 and 135.

⁵⁴⁵ O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1990.

⁵⁴⁶ O'Brien, 33.

development, *Tracers* opened on October 17, 1980 at the Odyssey Theatre with help from the producers, Ron Sossi and Lupe Vargas DiFusco. *Tracers* first run was nine months and began to receive awards including the Drama-Logue Critics' Award for Director and the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Award for Ensemble Performance. The original production was described as "one of the strongest pieces of the 1980-1981 Los Angeles stage season."⁵⁴⁷ Twenty years later, *Tracers* returned to The Odyssey in 2001. *Tracers* made an initial splash in 1980 that rippled for years.⁵⁴⁸

One element that DiFusco loves about the piece and about each new production is that *Tracers* remains a class ensemble piece. Actors who have been in the play "form friendships, lifelong friendships. They experience our experiences."⁵⁴⁹ He believed in the power of the play, specifically due to the entire cast being made up of veterans. For DiFusco, he felt as though the ensemble created a "confessional event" that goes beyond a play. He said, "We were acting out our PTSD, which wasn't acting."⁵⁵⁰ With each performance run, original contributors to the creation of *Tracers* came and went. DiFusco remained and still remains the one most tied to it. To this day, you cannot do a production of *Tracers* without going through DiFusco himself.

DiFusco continues a hands-on approach to the play. He likes to have the opportunity to advise the director and meet with the actors. He never expected that *Tracers* would remain such a huge part of his life. He told me, "There's not a day that

⁵⁴⁷ Sullivan, Dan. "'Tracers' Makes the Critical Leap." *Los Angeles Times*. 26 Jan. 1985. http://articles.latimes.com/1985-01-26/entertainment/ca-13876_1_tracers

⁵⁴⁸ See more under Past Productions.

⁵⁴⁹ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁰ John DiFusco.

goes by that doesn't have to do with *Tracers*.”⁵⁵¹ The ensemble is continually important in the production of the play. Despite the play text being concrete there is still a sense of “group creation,” DiFusco explained.⁵⁵² He wanted to highlight the importance of the ensemble and group storytelling. Even if DiFusco was involved in the production, he wanted people to own it. DiFusco emphasized, “I don't have to be in the room; it's theirs. They own the experience. Young groups keep rediscovering it. Past actors want to see new productions. People want to see what other people do with it.”⁵⁵³ The tradition of passing the play along to the next group is part of the joy that DiFusco find with each new production of *Tracers*.

Tracers had a long life since its original inception. DiFusco compares it to a concert or an album, “It's a great album and I'm glad people are playing it.”⁵⁵⁴ He believes there is power through the use of music in the play. But people were not always drawn to it. *Tracers* was controversial. He told me that he knew of a teacher who was fired for doing the play because of the language and drug use. DiFusco also said, “I've done a million post-show discussions and the language always comes up.”⁵⁵⁵ Also, “Vietnam was a thing that no one wanted to talk about. I had to beg people to come. But eventually it caught on,” he explained.⁵⁵⁶ The fact that it caught on did not mean the controversy of the play stopped, it just became more palatable. DiFusco told me I should go on YouTube and search for “*Tracers*” so I did and found

⁵⁵¹ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵² John DiFusco.

⁵⁵³ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁴ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁵ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁶ John DiFusco.

pages of videos. There are interviews with DiFusco, trailers for theatre productions, kids doing monologues from it in the mirror, and more.

DiFusco told me that people see the play over and over again. He has even heard people say, “I need my *Tracers* fix.”⁵⁵⁷ I asked him why he thinks people keep coming back to it. He answered, “You’re never going to fall asleep in a performance of *Tracers*. There is something special and spiritual about it. From the beginning, before there was a play, we would stand in a circle and talk about the dead.”⁵⁵⁸ There is a dedication to the dead in the script. It reads, “Dedicated to the 59,000 who missed the Freedom Bird.”⁵⁵⁹ This dedication must also be in the program and promotional materials (posters, promos, etc.) for any production of *Tracers* and is also a line in the play. Habu says, “Here’s to all the guys that missed the ‘Freedom Bird.’” He then pours out a few drops of beer onto the floor and everyone takes a drink.⁵⁶⁰ DiFusco talks about the dead as “ghost” and “beings” that are continually a part of and that create power within the play.

Similar to Mann’s *Still Life*, *Tracers* holds a unique space in theatre literature as documentary theatre or, perhaps a more appropriate term, testimonial theatre. I have previously discussed there are various terms to describe this form of theatre, but “testimonial theatre” is often the term used to describe *Tracers* as it is based on the actors’/creators’ experiences. But there is also some fiction or fabrications included. The audience is brought in closer through this form of theatre. We hear the words or at least stories of people who have lived through it. The “it” in this case

⁵⁵⁷ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁸ John DiFusco.

⁵⁵⁹ DiFusco, 3.

⁵⁶⁰ DiFusco, 58.

being the Vietnam War. Without a doubt, *Tracers* contributed to and helped shape testimonial theatre, but it also helped shape how the Vietnam veteran is viewed and perceived. *Tracers* is sometimes described as a “classic” Vietnam War play, after the plays by David Rabe, of course. It is truly the only play of its kind in regards to plays about the Vietnam War, which was written and performed by a group of Vietnam veterans, and reaching extreme popularity, and still being performed today.

Forsyth’s collection of essays states that testimonial theatre “can prompt an interrogation of our often all too easy acceptance of the supposed inviolable relationship between fact and truth.”⁵⁶¹ *Tracers* not only tells the story of the men involved with its creation and development, but similar to *Still Life*, the audience becomes an active part of the play in terms of the way the play speaks to them. As Gillilan notes, the “you” that is often mentioned in *Tracers* is the audience.⁵⁶²

With testimonial theatre comes a response to the question of “authenticity.” DiFusco’s *Tracers* is more “authentic” than some other plays because it was written by veterans. Authenticity can be, and has been, debated elsewhere, but it is important to note that each soldier/veteran experience is in its own right authentic. Zinman argues that Vietnam War plays are “credentialed” at various levels and perhaps *Tracers* is “most heavily credentialed of all the plays about the war.”⁵⁶³ In Charles A. Braithwaite’s (Senior Lecturer in Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln) article “‘Were YOU There?’: A Ritual of Legitimacy Among Vietnam Veterans” he explains, “Experience in Vietnam appeared to give the

⁵⁶¹ Forsyth, 2.

⁵⁶² Gillilan.

⁵⁶³ Zinman, 8.

speaker certain 'rights' as to the legitimacy of their viewpoints because 'when it comes to the 'Nam, you have no right to talk like you know something when you don't.' You can only 'know something' about the Vietnam War if you had been there."⁵⁶⁴ There has been scholarship that addresses this idea of "credentials" and how some people have claimed credit to having served or having served in a larger (or more dangerous) capacity than is true. One of the most well-known books on the subject is B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley's *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (1998). Burkett is a military researcher who served in Vietnam receiving the Bronze Star, Vietnamese Honor Medal, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm. He also served as co-chairman of the Texas Vietnam Memorial. Whitley is an investigative reporter who specializes in writing about crime and the legal system. Whitley is also a senior editor of *D Magazine* in Dallas. In this book, Burkett points out there are plenty of "phonies" that have "absorbed the myth and now perpetuate it, aided by the VA, veterans advocates, and the mental health care industry."⁵⁶⁵ According to Burkett, the phonies are in search of honor, praise, and often compensation for their fictional service. Burkett is angry and looking for answers. He often blames the media and not only their misrepresentation of the war, but also of the veterans—that most Vietnam veterans are homeless, drug users, losers, etc. Burkett writes, "I want an apology from America to every man and woman who served in Vietnam and to

⁵⁶⁴ Braithwaite, Charles A. "'Were YOU There?': A Ritual of Legitimacy Among Vietnam Veterans." *Western Journal of Communication*. Vol. 61, No. 4. (Fall 1997): 435.

⁵⁶⁵ Burkett, B.G. and Glenna Whitley. *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*. Verity Press Publishing, 1998, xxvii.

every family who lost a son or daughter, an apology not for their service or their loss, but for the indifference and disrespect heaped on Vietnam veterans, living or dead, after the war.”⁵⁶⁶ Zinman notes that not only were the men veterans, but specifically “combat” veterans. This idea is also examined in *Stolen Valor*. For veterans of the war, there is a clear distinction between those who saw combat and those who did not.

This form of testimonial theatre also lends itself to the fracturing or restructuring of a common linear form or as Fenn describes it “fragmented consciousness.”⁵⁶⁷ The narrative of the soldier/veteran is often told in a linear fashion: joined the military, went to basic training, shipped abroad, served time, and returned home. Of course, there are several variations to this, including the 59,000 that died or were missing in action abroad. Vietnam War plays often address these steps even if they are not told linearly. The Vietnam War “disrupted the master narrative,” as Sturken discusses, so why should not the plays?⁵⁶⁸ Sturken continues, “Attempts to rescript the Vietnam War have been as much about healing, with its bodily metaphors, as they have been about soothing over the disruptions of the war’s narrative.”⁵⁶⁹ Perhaps these plays are an attempt on the playwrights’ behalf to rescript their experience of the war. *Still Life* is told from the “present” looking back on the past, but the timeline is not linear. The plot jumps from point to point including before the war, during the war, and after the war. Ringnalda argues,

⁵⁶⁶ Burkett, 591.

⁵⁶⁷ Fenn, 193.

⁵⁶⁸ Sturken, 16.

⁵⁶⁹ Sturken, 16.

The real war would never even have started were it not for the fact that Americans saw themselves as the protagonists in the most linear of narratives: the domino theory. Long before the war started, we were a people pretending to be characters in a false, superimposed genre. And when this paper genre disintegrated, we left hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans without a book and without an author.⁵⁷⁰

Tracers is also a non-linear narrative. Gillilan notes, “The play lacks a central protagonist, shifts locations and times in a non-linear fashion, and has multiple, contradictory endings.”⁵⁷¹ While the pre, during, and post-war times are all addressed, they are not done so in a linear way. The play begins post-war and shifts time periods and locations throughout.

Text Analysis and Theoretical Applications

The title of a play, as any good dramaturgical analysis will show, is vital to the understanding of the play. In Mann’s *Still Life*, “still life” represents the life that Mark continues to lead, one that does not allow movement forward, but instead remains still—trapped in a time and place that cannot be escaped. The title is not fully explained (nor the words “still life” mentioned until the end of the play). In DiFusco’s *Tracers*, the “tracers” are mentioned within the first act as Little John asks Baby San, “Are the first two rounds in your magazine tracers?” Baby San responds, “Tracers?” And Habu provides us with the definition as well as an explanation of Little John’s question. “Tracers. That’s a bullet with an orange tip. When you fire it, it makes a red streak in the sky. You make the first two or three rounds tracers, that way when you see two red streaks in a row, you *know* you’re runnin’ outta ammo,

⁵⁷⁰ Jason, 84.

⁵⁷¹ Gillilan, 53.

it's time to reload."⁵⁷² I asked DiFusco about the title, *Tracers*. He explained that for a long time they did not have a name for it, but he wanted the group to create the title. DiFusco said, "I had the group stand in a circle and just throw out names."⁵⁷³ One of the rejected names was "Gidget Goes to Vietnam." DiFusco picked up on "tracers" because, "we all had memories of that vision."⁵⁷⁴ He also saw a double meaning in the title, "the bullets themselves and we, as Vietnam vets, *tracing* our memories."⁵⁷⁵ The memory and remembrance present in *Tracers* speaks to the larger issue of this project: how we remember and memorialize the veteran. What does it mean for a nation to remember? Sturken argues that collective remembering "can often appear similar to the memory of an individual—it provides cultural identity and gives a sense of the importance of the past."⁵⁷⁶ This binary of the individual versus collective is continually vital for understanding the veteran and the war experience. Reston, Jr. claims the playwright becomes even more important than the historian "for in no other war of our history was the private word more important than the public pronouncements, the whispered intimacies between friends—whether dignitaries or the boys in the streets and trenches—more important than the statements from lecterns or barricades or muddy foxholes."⁵⁷⁷ It is through the playwright and, in this case also the veteran, that a different light is shed on the Vietnam veteran experience.

⁵⁷² DiFusco, 29.

⁵⁷³ John DiFusco.

⁵⁷⁴ John DiFusco.

⁵⁷⁵ John DiFusco.

⁵⁷⁶ Sturken, 1.

⁵⁷⁷ Reston, Jr., ix.

At the end of the text, there is a note from DiFusco on ideas to keep in mind for the staging of *Tracers*. He urges, “Probably the most important thing to keep in mind when staging this play is the relentless energy of the play. It was conceived and created by a group of men who had something to get off their chests, so the true energy of the play should be unyielding.”⁵⁷⁸ DiFusco includes other notes such as quick pacing, attention to humor, costumes, props, and stylistic choices in choreography and action. For costume and props, “The play is performed with fragmented costuming (when in Vietnam, a fatigue shirt and a brush hat suffice; “Tracers,” and other stateside scenes should be performed in civvies) and a minimum of props, except for six M-16’s, which are visible in a rack onstage.”⁵⁷⁹ DiFusco inserts these comments as an attempt to have more control over the production even when he is not involved. In our interview, he told me that he has seen terrible productions of *Tracers* before, but “what are you going to do?”⁵⁸⁰ He explains, “You cannot hope to realistically recreate a battle on stage with six actors but you should choose a style of movement (incorporating sound and lights) which gets at the surreal feeling of what it was like to be in America’s first rock and roll war.”⁵⁸¹ Another element that is important for the production is the set. DiFusco explains that the set can be fairly simplistic and minimal, but “close attention should be paid to the rendering of the Vietnam War Memorial (the Wall) toward the end of the play. This can be illustrated symbolically or literally. A set designer should be

⁵⁷⁸ DiFusco, 72.

⁵⁷⁹ DiFusco, 10.

⁵⁸⁰ John DiFusco.

⁵⁸¹ DiFusco, 72.

looking for something that expresses the greatest loss—all the lives.”⁵⁸² The importance of this is clearly seen in one of the final scenes, “The Resurrection (The Ghost Dance).” Perhaps, out of all of his notes and guidelines, the final notes are the most important to him, “Most of all bear in mind that this play is based on truth.”⁵⁸³

Bookends: Prologue and Epilogue

The prologue and epilogue function in a way many places have used them as a kind of bookend. This storytelling device frames the entire play between the repetition of the set of statements and questions within the prologue and epilogue. Gillilan writes, “This scene [the prologue] and others like it in *Tracers* create a present-mindedness, recapitulating past experiences using the ongoing, current memories of the veteran actors.”⁵⁸⁴ The text is as follows:

Ensemble: Someone told me you’re a vet!
Someone told you had a gun.
You killed people?
You were only nineteen?
You volunteered?
You’re bullshitting me.
Oh, you’re one of the lucky ones who made it back.
I’m sorry.
I suppose you don’t want to talk about it?
Yeah, we saw that on TV.
How was the heat?
How was the rain?
How were the women?
How were the drugs?
How was Bob Hope?
How does it feel to kill somebody?
You were a pawn.
You were a hero.

⁵⁸² DiFusco, 72.

⁵⁸³ DiFusco, 73.

⁵⁸⁴ Gillilan, 53.

You were stupid, you should have gone to Canada.
You were there?
You were there?
You were there?
You were there?
You were there?
You were there?⁵⁸⁵

It is important to reprint the prologue/epilogue here as it speaks to the overarching discussion in the research presented here. It specifically shows some of the stereotypical, but also literal responses and questions veterans of the war had to encounter upon their return home. As this play was a collaboration between a number of veterans, coming to an agreement to use these particular statements and questions highlights, at a minimum, agreement of their similar experiences. These repeated questions set up an “expectation that the play will answer them. When they are asked the same question over and over at the end, there is a realization that the answers have eluded both the players and the play, and only the debilitating repetition remains. *Tracers* thus becomes a model of the war itself.”⁵⁸⁶ These questions are directed at the veterans, but could just as easily have been asked of the government, questioning the United States’ participation in the war.

Training for War

One of the cited reasons as to why (and how) the U.S. lost the Vietnam War is our training. The North Vietnamese training was distinctly different from the U.S. training of military personnel. Training is not discussed much in any of the three plays examined here. Training is a large part of how veterans of the war analyze

⁵⁸⁵ DiFusco, 11-12.

⁵⁸⁶ Zinman, 10.

their experience. When veterans write books about their service in Vietnam, basic training, among other training, is often a part of it. Training is also a large portion of the questions asked in Texas Tech University's Vietnam archival Oral History Project. Those questions range from simple inquiries about location of basic training and advanced training to an evaluation of the training itself. One question specifically asks, "Describe your Basic and Advanced training. Was the training good/bad/adequate?"⁵⁸⁷ Another one asks, "Did your training prepare you for the duties you were expected to perform in Vietnam/Southeast Asia?"⁵⁸⁸ The questions include an investigation of training equipment, trainers, and general effectiveness of training. Many of the cultural representations of the war only represent basic training as theatrics displayed by screaming drill sergeants and scared recruits. The drill sergeant in *Tracers*, Williams, is the only person to discuss training in the play. Williams explains,

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics trains its infantry for eighteen months. We train ours for eighteen weeks. Charlie Cong has been at it for twenty-six years. We issue them the most sophisticated equipment in the world, but we do not teach them how to use it. We commit them to the combat zone in units so large that their support facilities become targets for insurgents. They are now eighteen and nineteen years old. Before they are twenty-one, nearly half of them will be killed or wounded. With a two-year draft, we send out amateurs to play against pros in a game for keeps. Ten percent should not even be here. Eighty percent are targets; we have no time to train them to be more. Ten percent are fighters. One in a hundred may become a warrior. I must seek him out. I must come down heavy on him. Upon him the success or failure of our present conflict lies. Ten percent are fighters. One in one hundred is a warrior. Eighty percent are targets.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ Boyle, David. "Veteran Questionnaire." *Texas Tech University*. March 11, 2014.

⁵⁸⁸ Boyle, D. "Veteran Questionnaire."

⁵⁸⁹ DiFusco, 23.

This monologue from Williams is direct address to the audience. Similarly to *Still Life*, *Tracers* shifts back and forth between the utilization of direct address and addressing the characters. At one point in a long paragraph of Williams' the stage directions read, "*He alternates between addressing the audience and addressing the actors.*"⁵⁹⁰ This can make a story more difficult to follow for an audience member, but may also have the power to make the experience more present and even more "real" for the audience.

Story Through Music

As I mentioned in the introduction of this section, there are several references to music throughout the script. The music seems to be a vital part, according to DiFusco's own love of music and the continual references to the concert-like experience of the play. DiFusco explained to me, "I played Doc in the original cast, but I would say I am scattered all over the play. In particular, the ritual and the sound of the whole piece. The rock and roll vibe, energy, and language are all me."⁵⁹¹ The music and sound effects require attention as well as copyright permission. In the notes for the text DiFusco addresses the importance of the music, "The sound track is listed in the script because it is an integral part of the play. One could say that the sound track becomes a character in itself—an expression of the teenage warriors' psyche."⁵⁹² Zinman writes, "The ultimate ensemble pieces, it is, as many of these big-cast plays are, full of cadenced chants, hard rock music, aggressive

⁵⁹⁰ DiFusco, 16.

⁵⁹¹ John DiFusco.

⁵⁹² DiFusco, 73.

choreography, mime, and surreal lighting—in other words, it is highly theatrical.”⁵⁹³ The script calls for over fifteen songs to be played and/or sung by actors. The songs range from Bruce Springsteen’s “Shut Out the Light” to “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Rolling Stones to Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner.”⁵⁹⁴ It is clear that DiFusco attempts to set the scene or make a statement with song selection and their placement throughout the script. Sometimes the actors directly address the music if the songs are played during a scene. While high, the men themselves also sing numerous times. Fenn acknowledges *Tracers* relies “heavily on songs and choreographed routines, the piece presents fragments of experience expressed in memory ‘tracers,’ which attempt to establish connections between the present and the past.”⁵⁹⁵ Perhaps some of the songs are exactly what people would expect from a Vietnam War play, but regardless of expectations or preconceived notions, the songs create a soundscape to the play, the 1960s, and the war.

There are only a handful of drug references throughout the play. Perhaps the most memorable and dramatized moment is when Baby San goes to an apothecary shop in Saigon looking for incense. He returns and shows the guys what he purchased. He explains that the storeowner did not speak English and the only way he was able to communicate what he wanted—incense—was by “stickin’ my fingers up my nose and sniffin.”⁵⁹⁶ Quickly, the guys figure out that what he purchased was not incense, but instead it was skag—heroin. This hardly holds them up from giving it a try. Each of the guys takes a turn snorting some of the heroin. Baby San starts to

⁵⁹³ Zinman, 8.

⁵⁹⁴ DiFusco, 12, 30, 34, 40.

⁵⁹⁵ Fenn, 193.

⁵⁹⁶ DiFusco, 35.

sing, “Ma-ri-a! I just met a girl named Maria!” and Dinky Dau joins him, “Maria...I’ll never stop saying Maria...”⁵⁹⁷ All of them get high and Baby San suggests an idea, “Let’s go out on the bunker and look at the tracers.”⁵⁹⁸ The songs continue from *West Side Story* to “Puff the Magic Dragon” and “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”⁵⁹⁹

One of the more powerful uses of music comes from the men singing a song, entitled “We Like It Here.” One of the actors remembered singing this song while in the service. The song is sung to the tune of “O Tannenbaum” and is described in the stage directions as a “drunken GI song.”⁶⁰⁰ Together they sing,

We like it here. We like it here./You’re fuckin’ A, we like it here./We shine our boots, we shine our brass,/to keep the lifers off our ass./And even though we got malaria,/we’ll still police the fuckin’ area./We like it here. We like it here./You’re fuckin’ A, we like it here.

We’ll patrol the paddies, sweep the hills,/and triple reports of all our kills./And even though we got rounds coming’ in,/we’ll try to suck our bellies in.

We like it here. We like it here./You’re fuckin’ A, we like it here.
We’ll all be grunts until we’re gone,/and say goodbye to Charlie Cong.
We like it here. We like it here./You’re fuckin’ A, we like it here./We like it here. We like it here./You’re fuckin’ A, we like it here.⁶⁰¹

While music remains a significant part of the storytelling, the mention of literature is also prevalent. There is mention of Eldridge Cleaver’s collection of essays, *Soul on Ice* (1968), which he wrote while in Folsom State Prison.⁶⁰² Habu, who is black, carries a copy and brings it out in front of Williams (who is white) who

⁵⁹⁷ DiFusco, 37.

⁵⁹⁸ DiFusco, 39.

⁵⁹⁹ DiFusco, 40.

⁶⁰⁰ DiFusco, 50.

⁶⁰¹ DiFusco, 59. The use of “fuck” can be read and/or heard as somewhat shocking. Gillilan notes, that the use of “fuck” throughout the play adds humor while at the same time desensitizing the audience to the word.

⁶⁰² DiFusco, 18.

berates him for it. Williams, along with many others in the world at the time, associated Cleaver's book with the Black Panthers and a militant perspective on race. Williams says to Habu, "Lose the dark glasses, soul brother. You're in the real world now."⁶⁰³ Race is mentioned throughout the play. This moment between Habu and Williams leads to one of the more poignant moments of race discussed in the play. Williams screams at Habu, "Get down on your back, maggot. Knees up, maggot. Now you do sit-ups until your ass turns green, maggot. Maggots, I ain't got no black maggots. I ain't got no white maggots. I ain't got no red or yellow or brown maggots. All my maggots are green. Only color maggots are issued is in green. You got that?!"⁶⁰⁴ To which all the men reply, "Sir, yes, sir."⁶⁰⁵

Literature often serves as a catalyst within *Tracers* as seen with *Soul on Ice*. There are also mentions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Richard Wagner, but the two major literary references are Luigi Pirandello and Herman Hesse, both brought up by Professor, which I discuss more, later.⁶⁰⁶ He has apparently been seen reading Pirandello as Baby San approaches him at one point and asks Professor if he is reading something "by that Italian guy, Panangangenellio?"⁶⁰⁷ Professor corrects him on Pirandello's name as Baby San catches a glimpse of the title—*Steppenwolf*. Baby San gets excited as he assumes that the book is about the rock band Steppenwolf that was popular from 1968-1972.⁶⁰⁸ Professor corrects him, "This one

⁶⁰³ DiFusco, 18.

⁶⁰⁴ DiFusco, 19.

⁶⁰⁵ DiFusco, 19.

⁶⁰⁶ DiFusco, 45-46 and 53-54.

⁶⁰⁷ DiFusco, 45.

⁶⁰⁸ DiFusco does use a Steppenwolf song in the play, "Magic Carpet Ride" on page 40, which was released in 1968.

has nothing to do with rock 'n' roll, Baby San.” Hermann Hesse, German-Swiss poet and novelist, wrote *Steppenwolf* (1927). Professor explains that he has read *Steppenwolf* three times. Perhaps the book speaks to Professor because of its autobiographical and psychoanalytical response to Hesse’s own spiritual struggles.

The use of music and literature is intentional, but it unintentionally goes against DiFusco’s ambiguity of time. *Tracers*, unlike *Still Life*, demonstrates some qualities of the era. *Still Life* is told from a separated perspective as they did not tell their story until 1978, three years after the war ended. *Tracers* is written from a different approach, one that gives audiences a non-time specific look at the time during and after the war. The band Steppenwolf, for example, was popular for a very specific time frame from 1968 to 1972. Other songs referenced in the play were also written throughout the 1960s and 1970s placing those moments in a narrower timeframe than perhaps DiFusco imagined for the play. Gillilan maintains, *Tracers* has a “distinct connection with the war experiences of the veteran authors, while at the same time developing within a cultural setting that has shaped and reshaped the war and its veterans over the past two decades.”⁶⁰⁹ The play references “hippies,” “goddamn flower child,” and “Black Panther.”⁶¹⁰ There is also mention of other cultural references that indicate the 1960s and 1970s, “no bullshit deferment like Joe Namath” and “Have I got a maggot who thinks it’s John-fuckin’-Wayne? Gimme a John-fuckin’-Wayne yell, maggot!”⁶¹¹ Joe Namath played football for the University of Alabama in the early 1960s where he injured his knee. Despite his injury he was

⁶⁰⁹ Gillilan, 52.

⁶¹⁰ DiFusco, 18.

⁶¹¹ DiFusco, 19 and 20.

drafted to the National Football League yet was deferred from the U.S. military. The line refers to questions surrounding Namath's deferment, specifically how can someone be cleared to play football professionally, but not cleared for military service?

Women and the War

The discussion of women is almost entirely negative in *Tracers*. Numerous characters talk about women, mostly as sex objects (prostitutes). Only rarely are the women an object of love. Most of the conversations address differences between American women and Vietnamese women. Dinky Dau says, "I don't want to need a woman, but I do. Now Vietnamese women, they are different. Appearances didn't matter to them. They knew the value of a touch, or just a smile. It was special to them. They made me feel special. They weren't whores—I know what you're thinking, but they weren't. They were women. Very special women."⁶¹² But the question remains, special how? Dinky Dau is the only one that speaks of women in this way. Dinky Dau (who's "real" name is Alex) is also one of the few who has a girlfriend back home, named Cheryl. But on page forty-four in the script, there is a scene entitled "Cheryl's Letter." This letter is a "Dear John" letter, which historically is known as a letter written by a wife or girlfriend to a soldier, often while overseas, ending the relationship. The cause of the termination is due to the wife or girlfriend finding a new love interest. It has been cited, though not officially, that more "Dear John" letters were written during the Vietnam War than any other war in U.S.

⁶¹² DiFusco, 13.

history.⁶¹³ Cheryl writes to Dinky Dau of the weather, tuition, and then introduces Roger, the new man her in life. She asks Dinky Dau if he remembers Roger and writes, "Alex, I have to tell you that I've been dating Roger. [...] I feel bad, Alex, because you're so far away. And real guilty, too, but I just had to tell you....I'll still write to you, if you want, so that you'll have someone to write to."⁶¹⁴ The rest of the men discuss Vietnamese women almost entirely as prostitutes, mocking their language. At one point, the ensemble says, "I souvenir you, GI. Boom-boom. Numbah-fuckin' one. Girlsan. Boysan. Mamasan. Papasan. Babysan."⁶¹⁵ Scooter also gives the new guys instructions on how to get sex,

And most important of all, if you want a piece of ass, just say, "Hey, mamasan, you give me number-one boom-boom." [...] Don't ask for number ten, 'cause that's what you'll get. Ask for number one. And don't go getting' attached to these people. They ain't nothin' but zipper-headed, rice-eatin', war-losin', gook motherfuckers.⁶¹⁶

Immediately after Dinky Dau receives and reads the letter from Cheryl, Baby San comes in telling Dinky Dau, and the others that he got the jeep and they can head down to the "massage parlor." Baby San says, "Fuckin' A, man. I got my cum catcher."⁶¹⁷ Dinky Dau who normally bows out of these outings agrees to go, "I guess I'll be meeting you guys down there this time, Scooter. Fuck it."⁶¹⁸

The Wounds of War

⁶¹³ Many of these sources are stories of individual soldiers from the war including Chuck Gross' book *Rattler One-Seven: A Vietnam Helicopter Pilot's War Story* (2004).

⁶¹⁴ DiFusco, 44.

⁶¹⁵ DiFusco, 14.

⁶¹⁶ DiFusco, 26.

⁶¹⁷ DiFusco, 45.

⁶¹⁸ DiFusco, 45.

In several of the Vietnam War plays there is some exploration of fear often tied to mental illness and PTSD. This is not new information, but each play addresses it in a new way. The Professor (whose name is Steve), who arguably, struggles most with the intellectual approach to war speaks of his fears, "I was losing control. I thought I was going insane. All I knew was, I was scared. No, this couldn't have anything to do with Vietnam. But I do remember certain places, and certain people's faces..."⁶¹⁹ Most of the moments of "fear" are connected to Professor. He also saw a side of war that not everyone saw: suicide. After getting a rat bite, Professor goes to see Doc (whose name is Case). His initial visit to the Doc is to get a malaria pill, a standard practice for those serving in Vietnam. The anti-malaria pills (mefloquine), along with pink salt tablets were required. Because of the negative side effects, those in command were responsible for ensuring that soldiers took mefolquine.⁶²⁰ Before the Professor heads out of the Doc's office, he brings up the rat bite. According to *Tracers*, the anti-rabies treatment, at the time, was fourteen shots in the stomach, one a day for fourteen days. Through these repeated visits with the Doc, Professor and Doc build a special bond. Doc asks Professor how he got the name "Professor" and questions, "Somebody caught you reading a book?"⁶²¹ This leads to a discussion of reading where they joke that the only things to read are *Sports Illustrated*, *True Detective*, and *Wonder Woman* comics.⁶²²

⁶¹⁹ DiFusco, 14.

⁶²⁰ Holmes, Richard. *Acts of War: A Novel of Police Terror*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, 114. There are additional studies that question the potential physical and psychiatric side effects.

⁶²¹ DiFusco, 53.

⁶²² DiFusco, 53.

The two talk about the horrific and hilarious things they have seen while in Vietnam. Doc says, “Sometimes I feel like I’m reading a book about this dude in Vietnam, but it isn’t a book—it’s real, it’s me, and I’m here.”⁶²³ Professor relates to Doc, “I know what you mean. Sometimes I feel like one of Pirandello’s characters.”⁶²⁴ Doc is impressed or surprised (it is not made clear) that Professor knows Pirandello. Professor explains, “Ah, college bullshit.”⁶²⁵ This recognition of a commonality between them leads to future conversations and debates on *Hamlet*, Wagner, and Hesse’s *Sidhartha* [sic] (1922). At one point, a rat scurries across the floor and Professor grabs Doc’s gun to shot it. Professor aims, fires, and the gun simply clicks—it does not fire. Professor questions why Doc does not have the gun loaded. Doc explains that he does not load the gun anymore, “I will fight no more forever.”⁶²⁶ Doc tells Professor that he is quoting Chief Joseph (1840-1904), leader of the Wallowa tribe who said these words when he surrendered during the Nez Perce War in 1877. Because of the bond they have developed and due to his need for the shots, Professor goes to see Doc for thirteen more days and continues to visit Doc for another month or more. Professor says,

Doc and I talked about a lot of things. We became close. We became ‘tight.’ Then one night I went to see Doc and I was told that earlier that same evening Doc had taken a .45 and put it to his head. All that was left was a note. I didn’t read the damn note. I remember thinking, I can’t converse with a note, I can’t relate to a fuckin’ note, I can’t be friends with a note. And then I sat down and tried to cry. But, as hard as I tried, I could not shed one tear for my friend who had just killed himself. I guess the machine just refused to shut itself off.⁶²⁷

⁶²³ DiFusco, 53.

⁶²⁴ DiFusco, 53.

⁶²⁵ DiFusco, 53.

⁶²⁶ DiFusco, 55.

⁶²⁷ DiFusco, 56.

This reference to the machine comes up again and again with Professor. He explains, “The machine was a defense mechanism I dreamed up in boot camp. When things got tough, I would just turn my mind off and become a machine. That way, no matter what they threw at us, no matter how hard it got, they could not break the machine. All I had to do was throw a switch.”⁶²⁸ The “machine” is a metaphor often used not only to describe the Vietnam War, but the military in general. Taft-Kaufman insists, “A soldier’s stance against the conflict did not absolve him from being a villain in the eyes of those who opposed it. Many nonparticipants made no distinction between the warrior and the war: if you went to ‘Nam, you were part of the war machine.”⁶²⁹ What does it mean to be a part of the war machine? And what are the consequences?

The dialogue related to wounding in *Tracers* is more specific and perhaps more flippant than in Mann’s *Still Life*. Mark, from *Still Life*, avoids discussion of wounds. The characters in *Tracers* speak of wounds in a grotesque, but yet ineffectual way. Kia, seemingly out of context, says, “Head wound. Stomach wound. A fuckin’ suckin’ chest wound.”⁶³⁰ Later, Dinky Dau tells a story of coming upon VC and shooting as “I watched my bullets as they ripped across his torso.”⁶³¹ Most of the discussion of wounds and death comes from Dinky Dau. He even describes the first time he killed someone, “There were eight or nine dead bodies lying on the ground, and I just kept blasting away at ‘em. I just kept blasting away at ‘em.”⁶³² Habu stops

⁶²⁸ DiFusco, 57.

⁶²⁹ Taft-Kaufman, 17.

⁶³⁰ DiFusco, 15.

⁶³¹ DiFusco, 31.

⁶³² DiFusco, 31.

him, “They ain’t even gonna get any deader.”⁶³³ This image of a soldier who continues to shoot a dead body is often present in films about the war and is also found here in *Tracers*. Perhaps there is some psychological issue, a rush of adrenaline, or even fear that causes this action. Each of the men has different responses to killing. In the same instant that Dinky Dau over-shoots the bodies, Baby San is shaking. Dinky Dau describes the shaking as “combat shakes.” Baby San says, “My hands are shakin’ like crazy. But I don’t feel scared. I don’t feel fuckin’ nothing.”⁶³⁴ This is the first and only mention of the “combat shakes” in *Tracers*. There are a variety of causes for the shakes, including combat stress reaction, which is also referred to as “combat fatigue.” Cahill explains in *Unto the Breach*, “War trauma is, after all, most commonly associated with military campaigns of the twentieth century and after—with the ‘shell-shock’ and ‘war neurosis’ of the First World War or the ‘combat fatigue’ and ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD) that have come to prominence in the years since the Vietnam War.”⁶³⁵ These shakes are a mix of both physical and mental responses to the trauma of war.

After this battle, they strip the bodies of their weapons, dump or keep whatever food they have on them, and begin, “kickin’ bodies.”⁶³⁶ Dinky Dau explains or attempts to justify it, “Hey, gotta make sure they’re dead, right? They were keeping little souvenirs.”⁶³⁷ Baby San finds a belt buckle and Scooter cuts off the ear of one of the dead. When they return to base Dinky Dau questions what he has done,

⁶³³ DiFusco, 31.

⁶³⁴ DiFusco, 31.

⁶³⁵ Cahill, 138.

⁶³⁶ DiFusco, 32.

⁶³⁷ DiFusco, 32.

but continues to make justifications, “It’s okay. It’s okay, Alex [his real name]. I know he would’ve killed me if he had the chance. Dear God, I know that little gook motherfucker would’ve killed me if he had the chance... He would’ve killed me if he had the chance. I know he would’ve.”⁶³⁸ And the lights fade. Dinky Dau relives these deaths throughout the play. He address the audience in the next scene,

I couldn’t get to sleep that night. I just wanted to talk to someone about what happened. You see, I kept flashing back on those bodies, and that one guy. I can still see the bullets ripping across his torso. Like I had a license to kill, huh? But he was a human being. I’m a human being?! I really lost it there for a minute. I was shooting at dead bodies. I was shooting at men I knew were already dead. It’s a terrible sight to see a man’s body get ripped apart like that. It was a frenzy that I got caught up in. A crazy, primal, stupid, fuckin’ frenzy. A frenzy of killing!⁶³⁹

In both *Tracers* and *Still Life*, characters talk about overkill and the lack of reaction or response from their fellow soldiers. It is as if it has become the norm. Perhaps the witnessing soldiers are fearful of what would happen if they attempted to stop the shooting.

In the next scene, the final scene of Act One, titled “Touchdown” Habu and Professor enter and “they get into patrol formation with weapons poised.”⁶⁴⁰ The scene continues with Habu,

They call ‘em patrols, I call them hunting parties. That’s what we do, you know...hunt ‘em, kill ‘em, and count ‘em. If we lose any, we count them, too. Then we call in the count and we get points. Where does it all go? I think it goes to a big computerized scoreboard, and every day the big brass go in and they look at it. They nod their big heads and they say, “Ah, very good hunting, boys.” How do I feel? It’s my team against his. And a kill is just a touchdown, man. *Fuck it.*⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁸ DiFusco, 32-33.

⁶³⁹ DiFusco, 34.

⁶⁴⁰ DiFusco, 40.

⁶⁴¹ DiFusco, 40.

In Cahill's *Unto the Breach*, while analyzing plays about war she notes, "I have focused on how the plays' rendering of violence in terms of what can be measured, counted, or otherwise appraised, bespeaks the culture's new calculus of killing."⁶⁴² After Habu has finished speaking there is gunfire, lights, and smoke. Habu and Professor move as if responding to an attack. This equation of war to sports is not unusual. Like sports, war has a winner and, as Habu notes, the score is based on points earned. Those points can be made up of deaths, cities overtaken, hills conquered, battles won, or others.

Years after the war has ended, in a scene called "1984 Tracers" (which I discuss later) Little John says, "I was a good soldier and good citizen."⁶⁴³ He looks back on his experiences almost as just another job he had to do. He tells us that he now has cancer and that he will not live past forty. We do not learn if he is married, but we do know that he has children. Little John speaks lovingly of his girls, but also with great sadness, "Mary was born without a stomach and Debbie only has one foot."⁶⁴⁴ Sharing these facts with the audience causes anger as he continues, "The war drags on. Fuck the VA! Fuck the Agent Orange lawsuit! Fuck Dow Chemical! Fuck the government! (*Exiting.*) Fuck it, man! Fuck it!"⁶⁴⁵ There have been many legal actions regarding the use of Agent Orange. Agent Orange is one of the many invisible (but sometimes visible) wounds of war. Many of these invisible wounds

⁶⁴² Cahill, 137.

⁶⁴³ DiFusco, 61.

⁶⁴⁴ DiFusco, 61.

⁶⁴⁵ DiFusco, 61. Dow Chemical was one of the manufacturers of napalm and Agent Orange.

“would not typically present themselves until long after the War’s end” including issues connected with Agent Orange.⁶⁴⁶

In 2010, the Veterans Administration (VA) released documents that included updated information about new potential diagnoses that have been linked to Agent Orange.⁶⁴⁷ Between 1962 and 1971, the U.S. sprayed more than ten million gallons of Agent Orange, an herbicide that was used in the jungles of Vietnam to kill and remove vegetation allowing better sightlines for the U.S. military.⁶⁴⁸ Symptoms and potential concerns regarding Agent Orange range from changes in skin color to liver damage to cancer.⁶⁴⁹ According to the VA, exposure to Agent Orange is constituted as “boots on the ground” in Vietnam for any length of time. There is no way of knowing exactly how many of the three million U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were actually exposed. Agent Orange is representative of temporality between the archive and the repertoire. There are tangible qualities of it: it was sprayed, soldiers in Vietnam were exposed, and it does have dangerous side effects. There are also intangible qualities of it: it is impossible to know how many people have actually been exposed as many veterans have not made claims to the VA regarding Agent Orange, and it is difficult (if not impossible) to tie diagnoses (i.e. cancer) directly to Agent Orange.

Veterans and their children continue to search for answers regarding Agent Orange and the war. One veteran, in reference to Agent Orange, said, “We got home

⁶⁴⁶ Boyle, B. *Masculinity*, 101.

⁶⁴⁷ Somes, Joan. “Vietnam Veterans: Getting Old, Getting Sick – Is This Service Related?” *Journal of Emergency Nursing*. Vol. 39, No. 6. Nov. 2013, 641.

⁶⁴⁸ “The Veterans Self-Help Guide to Agent Orange.”

⁶⁴⁹ “The Veterans Self-Help Guide to Agent Orange.”

in one piece, who'd think our service would come back to bite us 40 years later."⁶⁵⁰ But while in Vietnam, many soldiers paid little attention to the use of Agent Orange. As one veteran told Richard Stacewicz, "We loved it. We didn't think nothing about Agent Orange. We used to think it was cool."⁶⁵¹ Another veteran said, "At the time we didn't even know about Agent Orange, except we knew a lot of us were becoming sick."⁶⁵² When veterans first returned home many were concerned about the impact of Agent Orange—not only on their health, but also the health of their children as we see in Little John.⁶⁵³

Part way into Act Two, there is a post-battlefield scene, "Blanket Party." Four of the men in the play are "frozen in a position that is the physical manifestation of each actor/veteran's response to seeing dead bodies all over the stage."⁶⁵⁴ Another stylized actor is presented here as there should be no props used to represent the bodies. Throughout the scene the four men stack the invisible dead bodies, scattered across the stage. As Ringnalda analyzes the suggestion of bodies, "By not looking at the bodies directly, we actually see them more absolutely. In their palpable absence they become a sort of Platonic idea of carnage. Because the audience can't see the individual bodies, it finds itself in the overwhelming presence of the idea of death."⁶⁵⁵ Having not seen a production of *Tracers*, I cannot speak to the accuracy of that moment, but I imagine how audiences would envision what Ringnalda has described. Despite the bodies not being seen it is possible that "scenes of bodily

⁶⁵⁰ Somes, 641.

⁶⁵¹ Stacewicz, 169.

⁶⁵² Stacewicz, 297

⁶⁵³ Somes, 641.

⁶⁵⁴ DiFusco, 47.

⁶⁵⁵ Jason, 73.

danger and distress” can appear “to shock the senses, forces playhouse audiences into encounters with what can be termed ‘uncanny corporeality.’”⁶⁵⁶ As the men carry the invisible bodies, they describe their actions and their experience of touching the dead flesh. One describes it as “red Jell-O-O,” another says that he feels like a “garbage collector.”⁶⁵⁷ Baby San throws up at one point during this task. Little John is focused on locating detached body parts and pairing them up with the correct body. In response to Little John’s actions, Dinky Dau yells, “That stupid asshole thinks he’s playing with a jigsaw puzzle. (*To Little John.*) That’s a human being you’re fuckin’ around with!”⁶⁵⁸ Little John responds, “I know it’s a human being. That’s why I’m doing it!”⁶⁵⁹ We see these moments of grotesque actions paired with recognition, just as this moment between Dinky Dau and Little John demonstrates.

The most violent and descriptive scene of the play is one of the final scenes, “Ambush.” The scene begins with Scooter changing into fatigues and Little John checking over an M-16. The unit finds out where they are headed next, “The DM-fuckin’-Z.”⁶⁶⁰ The DMZ is the “demilitarized zone” in Vietnam, which is the territory that separates North and South Vietnam. In response to hearing this, Dinky Dau says, “Goodbye, conflict. Hello, World War III. This ain’t no conflict anymore, man. This shit’s escalating.”⁶⁶¹ The escalation of the war is an area of focused study by Vietnam War historians, but it was also something soldiers recognized, almost

⁶⁵⁶ Cahill, 168.

⁶⁵⁷ DiFusco, 48.

⁶⁵⁸ DiFusco, 49.

⁶⁵⁹ DiFusco, 49.

⁶⁶⁰ DiFusco, 63.

⁶⁶¹ DiFusco, 63.

immediately, upon learning of a particular battle or incident during the war. Professor tries to calm the group saying the information is incorrect and that they are actually being sent to Lai Khe to support the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Lai Khe was an ARVN and U.S. Army base northwest of Saigon. Baby San now enters to announce that he is being sent to Cambodia, with only thirty-three days left in country. The men ask Habu what he knows about Cambodia. He responds, “Do you see GENERAL WESTMORELAND written on this shirt? I’m just a fuckin’ squad leader—you think they tell me anything?! Get ready to saddle up.”⁶⁶² After a few minutes of discussion and teasing, Scooter says to the group, “Hey, knock it off, you guys” as they go silent and hear the sounds of music and sound effects.⁶⁶³ They begin to check their gear, “make signs of the cross, offer silent prayers, clasp hands, etc. All start to psyche up, grunting, yelling boosting the adrenalin. This is primal,” as the stage directions note.⁶⁶⁴

In a surreal moment, the scene has shifted to an ambush and “*there is no way out.*”⁶⁶⁵ They all begin shouting, “Where’s the firing coming from? Anybody know what the fuck’s goin’ on? Who’s doing the shooting? What direction we supposed to be goin’ in? Move into the treeline!”⁶⁶⁶ The next stage direction reads, “All except Scooter get blown away, with Baby San killing himself. Dinky Dau is still alive, screaming.”⁶⁶⁷ In an instant, everything has changed. Dinky Dau screams, “My legs! Scooter, I can’t feel my legs!” In a daze, Scooter manages to get to Dinky Dau and he

⁶⁶² DiFusco, 64-65.

⁶⁶³ DiFusco, 66.

⁶⁶⁴ DiFusco, 66.

⁶⁶⁵ DiFusco, 66.

⁶⁶⁶ DiFusco, 66-67.

⁶⁶⁷ DiFusco, 67.

repeats, “Are my legs okay, Scooter? I can’t feel my legs!”⁶⁶⁸ Scooter attempts to help Dinky Dau and calls for a medic, but no one else is alive to respond. He searches for his gun as gunfire continues around him. Scooter quickly realizes that he is injured too. He is bleeding all over. Scooter talks himself through his next actions,

Gotta find a belt...tie it off. I could still die—lose too much blood. God, I don’t wanna die. I don’t wanna die here. (*Looks to heaven.*) You hear that? I don’t wanna die! Keep it together. Keep it together. Talkin’ to God now. Keep your fuckin’ sanity, GI! (*Crawls to Baby San.*) Baby San, Baby San, I gotta tie off my fuckin’ leg. Baby San, you fucker. You fuckin’ killed yourself!⁶⁶⁹

Baby San’s death becomes the second suicide of this play. The scene ends with Scooter cursing God and screaming for his mother.

Escaping the War: Dreams

Similar to Mann’s *Still Life*, DiFusco’s *Tracers* has a variety of themes, motifs, and topics throughout. In addition to being wounded, coming home, and commemoration, *Tracers* discusses a wide variety of ideas. One prevalent theme is the concept of dreams. Scooter tells the same dream twice during the play.⁶⁷⁰

Immediately after the prologue, the first scene, “Home from the War—The First Tracers,” begins. Scooter wakes as if coming out of a nightmare. This is his dream:

I keep havin’ this dream about a trip I’m goin’ on. I board a plane for Europe, but I always end up in Vietnam. I look down from the plane, and I can see a lot of shit goin’ on below. I get off the plane, and then I can’t find my unit. I meet other GIs on the road. I ask them about my unit. But they just give me bullshit answers. I dive into a bunker. And Little John is sittin’ there. He’s covered with blood and he’s been cryin’. I ask him what he’s doin’ there, and why he isn’t buried. He just starts laughin’ and floats right up into my face and he says, “You don’t think I know I’m dead? I want you to know somethin’,

⁶⁶⁸ DiFusco, 67.

⁶⁶⁹ DiFusco, 67.

⁶⁷⁰ DiFusco, 12 and 62.

man, I'm pissed off, I don't get to go home." We get hit with a ground attack. I see the VC shoot Little John, and I shoot two fuckin' VC. But in my dream nobody dies. Everybody just gets up and we all walk off—together.⁶⁷¹

The distinctive moment in this dream is when Scooter says, "But in my dream nobody dies. Everybody just gets up and we walk off—together."⁶⁷² Later in the play, he begins this dream a second time. "After I got out of prison I went to the Wall in Washington," then he goes into the same dream told at the beginning of the play.⁶⁷³ This telling ends slightly different, "Because in my dream we've all come home—together."⁶⁷⁴ Throughout *Tracers* there is a disconnect, whether real or perceived, about their reality of war. At one point Baby San says, "I want to wake up now, I would like to go home."⁶⁷⁵ There are these literal moments and also more abstract moments of discussing dreams.

The final two scenes of the play—"Ambush" and "The Resurrection (The Ghost Dance)"—are to be, as I mentioned earlier, "staged in a dreamlike way."⁶⁷⁶ Depending upon the director and performers, this allows for the scene to be entirely organic as well as new and different from previous or future productions. "The Resurrection" is a staged version of the dedication that DiFusco includes in the front of the script. It is staged as a dance to be interpreted by the director and other collaborators. This calls for each company to imagine (or re-imagine) their unique form of memorial for those that were killed or MIA in the Vietnam War. Each production then creates a memorial that lives in the repertoire of the performer and

⁶⁷¹ DiFusco, 12.

⁶⁷² DiFusco, 12.

⁶⁷³ DiFusco, 62.

⁶⁷⁴ DiFusco, 62.

⁶⁷⁵ DiFusco, 24.

⁶⁷⁶ DiFusco, 62.

audience members. It only ever becomes part of the archive if the performance is recorded and saved, perhaps only remaining accessible to the theatres or universities that produced *Tracers*. There is no dialogue in this scene. All that is provided is the title—"The Resurrection (The Ghost Dance)"—and the following stage directions.

A ritualistic choreography to raise the dead and pay tribute to the 59,000 who were killed or M.I.A. in Vietnam. Music "Born Never Asked" by Laurie Anderson. Lighting is dreamlike. Candle light can be used. The actors rise slowly and put their weapons away. All face Upstage. All turn out at the same time. A rendition of the Vietnam Memorial ("the Wall") is revealed on stage. The actors step forward and slowly salute. Williams appears (apart from the ensemble) and slowly performs a twenty-one-gun salute. The ensemble salutes again. They evolve into a group movement, using Tai Chi forms. The group movement ends with each actor in tableau with some relationship to the Wall, i.e., touching names, looking away, saluting, etc. This is a gentle ritual. Music fades. Lights cross-fade to general stage light. The tableau is broken when the Professor speaks the first line of the Epilogue.⁶⁷⁷

If possible, he wants people who are involved in a production to visit the Wall (Vietnam Veterans Memorial). Specifically he said, "Go to the Wall. Always go to the wall."⁶⁷⁸ Those who have been to the wall can imagine why this is important to DiFusco as the phenomenological experience of being at the memorial always allows for a more personal connection not only to that moment of the play, but to the entire performance experience. Specifically, this becomes even more vital to productions that are not made up of veterans. After this moment in the play, all that follows this scene is the epilogue, which as I previously discussed is a repeat of the prologue.

Soldiers Coming Home

⁶⁷⁷ DiFusco, 68.

⁶⁷⁸ John DiFusco.

“Coming home” is addressed as seemingly random moments throughout the play. Although the play is somewhat chronological it does not always move in a linear path. There are no long monologues of dreaming of their bed back home or nostalgic evenings where they share about their home life. There are no moments of reflection and remembrances of the war upon returning home. But instead there are sporadic mentions and flashes of home. They all seem to desire freedom from Vietnam, and anywhere that is not Vietnam is better, whether that is home or not. Dinky Dau says to Habu, while pulling down his pants, “This is the last moon you’ll ever have to sleep under in the fuckin’ ‘Nam.”⁶⁷⁹ There is even some recognition of Vietnam *as* home. Scooter says, “Hey, man, ‘Nam is home for me, and you’re closer than blood. But we won’t hang out in the world, ‘cause there you’ll be black and I’ll be white.”⁶⁸⁰ This also relates to the question of identity addressed earlier. Scooter acknowledges that he and Habu may never have been friends back in the “real world,” but in Vietnam they are the same. This line also shows how camaraderie becomes like family, that having fought together makes them “closer than blood.” Scooter has come to accept his fate in Vietnam and accepts that he may never make it home.

One of the later scenes in Act Two is “1984 *Tracers*,” which is in reference to the earlier publication and to the style of which the first productions were presented. The scene begins with Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” and continues to underscore the six short monologues that follow. These monologues are stories from six of the characters as reflections of their time in Vietnam and the

⁶⁷⁹ DiFusco, 60.

⁶⁸⁰ DiFusco, 59.

war. Some of them speak of home; some of them speak of only the past. Professor tells a story about November 11, 1984. He was meditating in a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. He was back in Southeast Asia, but he was unsure what drew him back there. And in the play, we do not learn how long he's been there. A young Thai girl approached him and they began to talk. He told her that he fought in the Vietnam War. "She smiled and said, 'Don't think too much. It will make you depressed.'"⁶⁸¹ He confessed that he had killed people and could not stop thinking about it. Professor's story ends, "She brushed my cheek with her fingertips, and whispered a sweet and gentle truth: 'The war is over. It's time to go home.'"⁶⁸²

Habu perhaps struggles with returning home the most of the men in the play. He says, "I got out for a while. Man, I couldn't hack it. I mean civilians don't know; hell they don't ever know how to stand in line, man. So, I re-upped, and then I extended. They just gave me my fifth hash mark and my fourth undetected-crime ribbon. I guess I'm just a lonely, ignorant fool evading reality...Lifer, lifer, lifer."⁶⁸³ Habu's story resonates with me the most. Having been a cast member in *The Telling Project: Kansas City* in fall 2015, I listened to the stories of six veterans. Only one veteran was involved with the Vietnam War, but the stories and experiences while entirely individual had similarities throughout. One Iraq veteran, in particular, Ted John had a similar response to Habu's. Ted served in the Marine Corps from 1986 to 1992, which included Desert Storm/Desert Shield. During that time he worked on

⁶⁸¹ DiFusco, 60.

⁶⁸² DiFusco, 60.

⁶⁸³ DiFusco, 61.

CH-53 A/D/E's.⁶⁸⁴ Ted explained, "Dealing with people who don't know what hierarchy, what order, what following the rules is like...you know, dealing with sloppy civilians, that was tough to get used to."⁶⁸⁵ Ted goes on to tell his story of when he took some young teenagers on a mission trip and how he barked orders at them like they were soldiers.

Past Productions

Tracers has a long performance history. After closing at the Odyssey in July 1981, it went on to be produced at Steppenwolf Theatre Company (the only early production of *Tracers* not directed by DiFusco) in Chicago in January 1984, directed by Gary Sinise.⁶⁸⁶ Sinise had to convince DiFusco that Steppenwolf would do right by DiFusco and the play. But this also meant casting non-veterans, which for DiFusco was arguably the toughest part of the decision to let *Tracers* go to Chicago. Only one cast member, Greg Williams, was a veteran, but Sinise did the work to make the play live up to DiFusco's standards by "pushing actors through a rigorous period of closed rehearsals, interviewing hundreds of veterans and simulating boot camp training."⁶⁸⁷ *Tracers* ran until April 1984. The play received the 1984 Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Ensemble Performance. One 1985 review from the *Chicago Tribune* described *Tracers* as "part psychotherapy and part improvisational experiment" and perhaps both are accurate.⁶⁸⁸ Steppenwolf's website says, "The

⁶⁸⁴ CH-53 is a "Sea Stallion," the common name for a transport helicopter.

⁶⁸⁵ *The Telling Project: Kansas City*.

⁶⁸⁶ See Figure 22.

⁶⁸⁷ "Play During Wartime."

⁶⁸⁸ Christiansen, Richard. "'Tracers' Brings Home the Tragedy of Vietnam." *Chicago*

play, more directly connected to the battlefield than any other play produced at the Steppenwolf, finds the horror and solace within relationships among men at war, and the ties that link them to the battles, long after the guns go silent.”⁶⁸⁹ Folks at Steppenwolf wanted to take the play to New York, but DiFusco was not sure. He wanted to hold on to his concept and feared that if he let go, the play would be changed. He wanted to be able to direct the play himself. *Tracers* made its New York debut in 1985. It was presented by the Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theatre Company at the Public Theatre. This production ran from January to July 1985. It was a new challenge for DiFusco because only two additional original cast members—Vincent Caristi and Richard Chaves—were involved in the New York production. DiFusco described, “It was quite a time, completely unknown actors. And overnight there were news crews there to do stories on our piece.”⁶⁹⁰ DiFusco said it was amazing to see how hard the new cast members worked. Just like in Chicago, “They [the actors] did their research and they were intensely committed,” he continued.⁶⁹¹ Commitment to the piece and to this form of storytelling seems as important, if not more so, than the actual stories being told. The New York run did receive some negative criticism from the press. One reviewer wrote that there is “nothing new in *Tracers*.”⁶⁹² And it continues, “It’s a blunt, free-flowing documentary collage in which a platoon of all-American “grunts” once again stumbles

Tribune. 22 Jan. 1985. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-01-22/features/8501050085_1_eight-vietnam-veterans-tracers-southeast-asian-war

⁶⁸⁹ “Plays During Wartime.” *Steppenwolf News and Articles*.

<http://www.steppenwolf.org/watchlisten/program-articles/detail.aspx?id=25>

⁶⁹⁰ John DiFusco.

⁶⁹¹ John DiFusco.

⁶⁹² Rich, “‘Tracers,’ Drama of Vietnam Veterans.”

ritualistically through the terrors of free-fire zones, trip wires, body bags, "subterranean rat-infested bunkers" and search- and-destroy missions - only to return home, if they return at all, to a country that would rather forget."⁶⁹³ But at the end of the day, despite criticism, the play still communicates its point, "the piece is no less powerful for that. When a nation's horror tale is told by its actual witnesses - and told with an abundance of theatricality, a minimum of self-pity - it can still bring an audience to grief."⁶⁹⁴

Tracers was originally published after its run in New York at the Public Theatre in 1985. For years after that publishing, DiFusco traveled the world directing, producing, and adapting the text as needed. In 2000, DiFusco published a "revised edition" of the text. He writes in the acting edition, "The script evolved and changed in different ways during rehearsals of these productions."⁶⁹⁵ He marked notes and changes throughout the process, but since those notes and edits were not always passed along or clear to the next performance of *Tracers*, DiFusco decided to publish the revised edition. DiFusco urges, "As time goes by, the Vietnam War has become more and more historical. It is my sincere hope that this revised edition will help generations to come to understand the war and its veterans."⁶⁹⁶ Throughout this section, I will rely on and quote from the revised edition. I will make notes, as necessary, regarding the first edition, but based on my conversations with DiFusco, the revised edition is the truer of the two.

⁶⁹³ Rich, "'Tracers,' Drama of Vietnam Veterans."

⁶⁹⁴ Rich, "'Tracers,' Drama of Vietnam Veterans."

⁶⁹⁵ DiFusco, 7.

⁶⁹⁶ DiFusco, 7.

After New York, and with help from the “exchange program” between The Public Theatre and the Royal Court Theatre, *Tracers* went to London later in 1985. It returned to Los Angeles at the Coronet Theatre in 1986. The next stop was the Annenberg Center at the University of Pennsylvania, also in 1986. Before going on tour, *Tracers* was produced in Australia. DiFusco then got offers for tours and he spent the late 1980s on tour directing and acting in various productions of *Tracers*. By then, DiFusco had a pool of actors to pull from in both LA and New York.⁶⁹⁷ He said, “Different actors would bring different things to the play.”⁶⁹⁸ Throughout the 1990s, post-*Tracers* touring DiFusco saw the doors that *Tracers* had opened for him. He was directing, which he had always enjoyed, “my name was out there. A sort of dramaturg/director kinda person, with *Tracers* at the top of the page.”⁶⁹⁹ After years of struggling to find directing work that was not associated with *Tracers*, he decided to go back to performing. Unless he had an “in” somewhere, he felt like he could not make a living as a director. But he also needed to re-open the door into performing so he wrote his own story. In 2011, DiFusco wrote a follow-up play to *Tracers* entitled *The Long Way Home: Reflections on the Tracers Journey*. Since 2011, it has been produced twice, once in 2012 and once in 2013. Stylistically, it is similar to *Tracers*, but *The Long Way Home* is a one-person show, with a musician on percussion and vocals. DiFusco likes to think of it as “unplugged” and an opportunity to set the record straight.⁷⁰⁰ I asked him, “what do you need to set straight?” He said that people “didn’t get it. We had headshots and Vietnam photos side-by-side and

⁶⁹⁷ See Figure 24.

⁶⁹⁸ John DiFusco.

⁶⁹⁹ John DiFusco.

⁷⁰⁰ John DiFusco.

people would still ask, ‘Oh, so you guys were all in Vietnam?’”⁷⁰¹ According to DiFusco, people were not clear about how *Tracers* was created. *The Long Way Home* is not yet published, but he hopes it will be soon.

Conclusion

DiFusco leaves the audience with questions, and perhaps the most important is, what were we doing there? MacPherson notes that many Vietnam veterans are “repelled by the absurdity of dying in Vietnam.”⁷⁰² MacPherson quotes a Vietnam G.I., “What am I doing here? We don’t take any land. We don’t give it back. We just mutilate bodies. What the *fuck* are we doing here?”⁷⁰³ *Tracers* does not seek to answer these questions, but instead reminds us of them. *Tracers* occupies a space in Vietnam War theatre literature that is unlike other plays. Fenn describes the play as scenes that are a “montage of memories of induction, experiences, and homecoming situations.”⁷⁰⁴ DiFusco attempted to create a story that would speak to the variety of experiences of the Vietnam soldier and veteran. Similar to most of the Vietnam War plays, *Tracers* lacks a true conclusion. Audiences most often do not leave the theatre with an “answer” to questions they entered with. Toby Zinman explains, “the plays [including *Tracers*] continue beyond their apparent conclusions, just as the war did. [...] There is what seems to be a last scene, followed by another scene, which undoes the order, the sense of finality, and leaves the play—and the audience—

⁷⁰¹ John DiFusco.

⁷⁰² MacPherson, 45.

⁷⁰³ MacPherson, 45. G.I. is a noun used in place of soldier or marine, etc.

⁷⁰⁴ Fenn, 193.

nowhere.”⁷⁰⁵ Some may consider this a negative comment on the play, but it is truthful on both the play and the war that it grapples with.

⁷⁰⁵ Zinman, 6.

Conclusion

Why is there such a rich literature about the Vietnam War, a war that for so many years no one wanted to hear about at all? How did that experience stir the nation and discover so many interpreters? There are no conclusive answers to such questions, though some suggestions may be offered.

— Don Ringnalda in Philip Jason's *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*

At the outset of this project, I had large ambitions to examine more plays and share more personal stories from veterans. But now I am more than satisfied with what these three plays—*Medal of Honor Rag* by Tom Cole, *Still Life* by Emily Mann, and *Tracers* by John DiFusco, et al.—offer in terms of analysis and storytelling. One aim of this project was to create dramaturgical case studies on these three plays. When veterans' stories are put on stage and documented on paper or in a recording, they contribute to the archive and commemoration of the war. They also give access to an individual perspective of the war.

The second goal of this project was to give a voice to the veteran and to show how that voice (as well as body, experience, stories, etc.) act as the archive and the repertoire simultaneously. In the case of *Medal of Honor Rag*, *Still Life*, and *Tracers*, the playwrights were able to share stories of real people in a variety of ways. A veteran of war has many stories to tell of bravery, hope, fear, loss, guilt, and freedom. The veteran narratives are told on official military documentation, in music, on television, in film, on stage, and on the page. These stories communicate only a portion of the war experience. Stories, especially ones as powerful as these, serve as memorial to the war and to the men and women who fought, died, and survived in the war in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War is one of the most written about wars in U.S. history. The war has been examined, questioned, and challenged from nearly every direction. What I hope to contribute with my investigation of the war and plays written about it is this same approach can be applied to any play that discusses war and/or veterans of war. My dramaturgical methodology that I employed here can be utilized to put the history of war in tandem with storytelling and performance. Through this approach, I was able to access more from the text than I would have if I had only performed “standard” script analysis techniques. The addition of other dramaturgical tools—investigating playwrights, researching past productions, applying theories, etc.—deepened my understanding and connection to the material and to the stories.

It also opened up a new way of thinking about memorialization of war. These plays are so deeply personal for the real people they are based on, the writers, and the performers. It is impossible for the theatre to fully embrace and replicate all the details of the aftermath of war. But with each war and veteran story we share as storytellers, we get one step closer to the ever-moving point in the distance. In *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, Margot Norris writes, “Looked at from this perspective, art can be seen to seize *what is left over* for its own terrain, a leftover in the form of the *human remainder*, the affective residue, the suffering that military histories imply but don’t voice, the inner experience that can’t be mapped, charted, counted, or otherwise quantified.”⁷⁰⁶ While most of us cannot see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall regularly, we can witness, support and encourage cultural

⁷⁰⁶ Norris, 21.

representations of the war that remind of us the 58,000+ U.S. men and women that died in Vietnam as well as the hundreds of thousands of Vietnam War veterans.

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Appendix

Vietnam War Timeline

This timeline is not exhaustive. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of additional moments in time before, during, and after the war. Each point on the timeline influenced why we went to war, what we did while we were there, how we left the war, and how country and the world perceived the war. The timeline I present here is an attempt to highlight some major (arguably) points of the war in Vietnam and put them in conversation with the plays. My hopes in providing this are that dates and references that are mentioned throughout the plays of Cole, Mann, and DiFusco can be viewed in context of the war. A more detailed outline of the Vietnam War can be found in many resources including *Vietnam War Almanac: An In-Depth Guide to the Most Controversial Conflict in American History* (2013) by James H. Willbanks, which includes over 400 pages of chronology.⁷⁰⁷ For a deeper explanation of the impact of these historical moments, I also suggest *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom* (2012) by Adrian R. Lewis, a three part guide that walks the reader through not only the Vietnam War, but also the historical events that took place before and after the war.⁷⁰⁸ What I have provided is a brief snapshot of each year from 1950-1975.

1950

- American advisors arrive in French Indochina

⁷⁰⁷ Willbanks, James H. *Vietnam War Almanac*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009.

⁷⁰⁸ Lewis.

- 1951
- U.S. signs an agreement with Saigon to aid South Vietnam
- 1952
- Dwight D. Eisenhower is elected president
- 1953
- U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon visits Vietnam
 - President Eisenhower approves budget to continue to supply military aid to Vietnam
- 1954
- Vietnamese forces occupy the French command post and the French are defeated
 - Eisenhower outlines "Domino Theory"
 - Geneva Convention
- 1955
- China and Soviet Union pledge support to Hanoi
 - Ngo Dinh Diem becomes President of Republic of Vietnam
 - The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (SEATO) is ratified by the Senate and President Eisenhower
- 1956
- Last of the French military leaves Vietnam
 - President Diem writes a new constitution
- 1957
- Communist insurgency begins in South Vietnam
 - Captain Harry Cramer, Jr., dies in a munitions accident and is the first American killed in the Vietnam War
- 1958
- Communist guerrillas attack north of Saigon
- 1959
- Weapons move Ho Chi Minh Trail
 - Major Dale R. Buis and Master Sergeant Chester M. Ovnand are the first Americans to die from hostile fire in the Vietnam War
- 1960
- John F. Kennedy is elected President
 - Vietcong (National Liberation Front) is formed
- 1961

- President Kennedy appoints Dean Rusk as Secretary of State, Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense, McGeorge Bundy as National Security Advisor
- President Kennedy approves a counterinsurgency plan, expanding U.S. assistance
- Bay of Pigs invasion
- President Kennedy sends Vice President Johnson to tour Saigon
- President Diem declares a national state of emergency

1962

- U.S. begins air support in South Vietnam
- U.S. 39th Signal Battalion (strictly a communication unit) arrives in Vietnam
- Strategic Hamlet program begins to provide security to rural populations
- U.S. military employs Agent Orange

1963

- Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolates himself in Saigon to protest President Diem
- President Diem overthrown and assassinated
- President Kennedy assassinated in Dallas

1964

- General Nguyen Khanh takes power in Saigon
- U.S. air power increases
- Gulf of Tonkin Incident and Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- Lyndon B. Johnson is elected President
- First U.S. women serve as advisors in Saigon

1965

- Operation Rolling Thunder begins
- First American combat troops (Marines) arrive in Vietnam (Danang)
- First conventional battle of the Vietnam War takes place at War Ia Drang Valley (US vs. North Vietnamese units)

1966

- First B-52 bombings of North Vietnam
- President Johnson meets with South Vietnamese leaders
- Veterans (from WWI and WWII) stage anti-war rally
- Dwight Johnson is drafted into U.S. Army

1967

- John DiFusco goes to Vietnam
- Operation Cedar Falls begins
- Battle of Tra Binh Dong
- Operation Junction City begins
- Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks out against the war

- Battle of Dak To

1968

- Dwight Johnson goes to Vietnam
- John DiFusco returns home from Vietnam
- Tet Offensive
- Battle for Hue
- My Lai massacre
- Martin Luther King, Jr. killed in Memphis
- Paris peace talks begin
- Robert Kennedy assassinated
- Operation Rolling Thunder ends
- Richard Nixon elected president

1969

- President Nixon begins secret bombing of Cambodia
- "Vietnamization" announced
- Battle Hamburger Hill
- Ho Chi Minh dies at 79
- My Lai massacre news reaches U.S.

1970

- [Mark] returns home from Vietnam
- Kent State Incident
- Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho begin secret talks

1971

- Lt. Calley is convicted of murder for My Lai
- Dwight Johnson is killed
- Pentagon Papers published by *New York Times*
- Thieu re-elected in South Vietnam

1972

- Secret peace talks revealed
- Break-in at Watergate Hotel
- Henry Kissinger says "peace is at hand"
- President Nixon wins reelection

1973

- Cease-fire signed in Paris
- End of draft announced
- Last American troops leave Vietnam
- Kissinger and Le Duc Tho win Nobel Peace Prize

1974

- Thieu announces renewal of war

- President Nixon resigns

1975

- Saigon falls
- U.S. Marines and Air Force airlift thousands of U.S. civilians and South Vietnamese refugees out of Saigon

Images



Figure 1(left): Private David Boyle (February 1967).

Figure 2 (right): David Boyle's parents with Boyle's uniform at a museum in Fort Wayne, IN (approximately 1985).



Figure 3 (left): David Boyle's tattoos flanking the sides of a Vietnam War scar (August 2014).

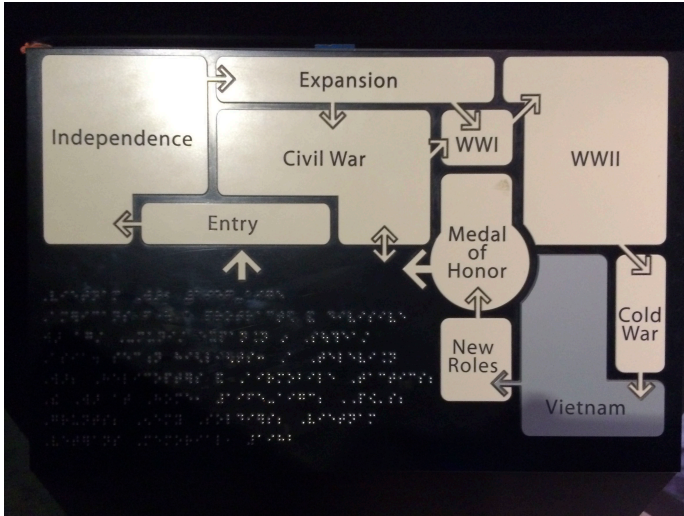


Figure 4 (left): Map inside the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (July 2015).

Figure 5 (right): The Vietnam War exhibit inside the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (July 2015).



Figure 6 (left): The Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (May 23, 2015).

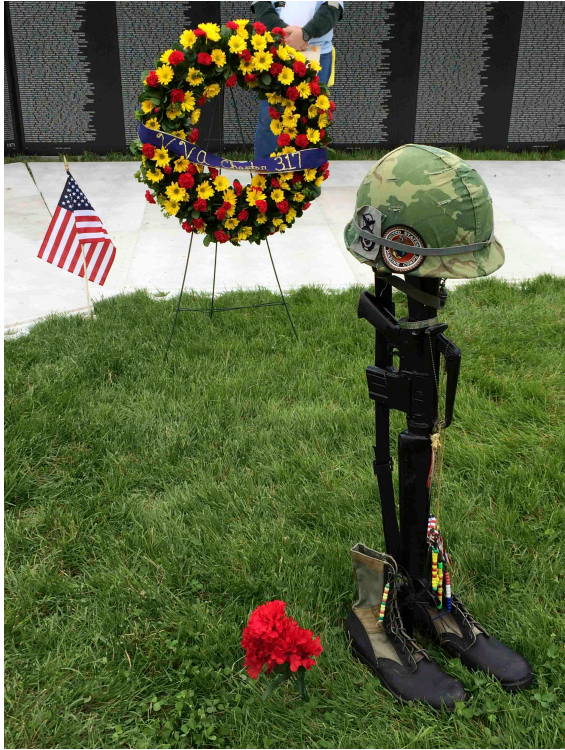


Figure 7 (left): Memorial objects (boots, rifle, helmet) displayed in front of The Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (May 23, 2015).

Figure 8 (right): Helicopter at The Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (May 23, 2015).





Figure 9 (left): The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Ryan Dawson (July 2015).

Figure 10 (right): The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Ryan Dawson (July 2015).

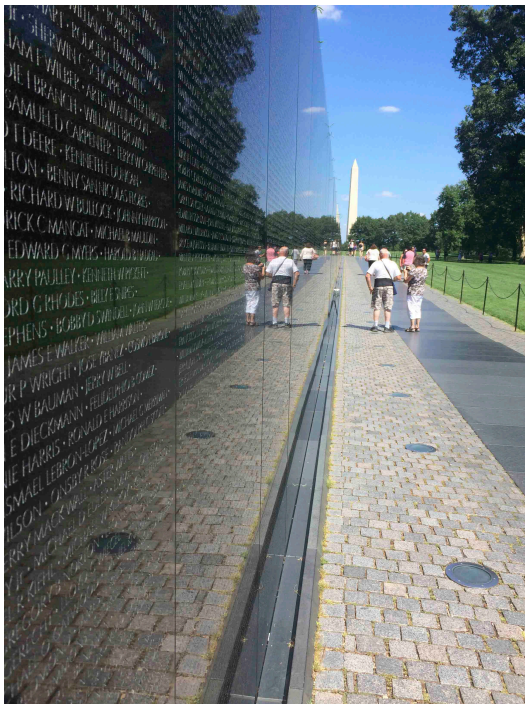


Figure 11 (left): The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (July 2015).

Figure 12 (right): The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle (July 2015).



Figure 13 (left): Vietnam War Memorial in Prairie Village, KS. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle.

Figure 14 (right): Vietnam Memorial Plaza at Antioch Park in Merriam, KS. Photo taken by Amanda Boyle.



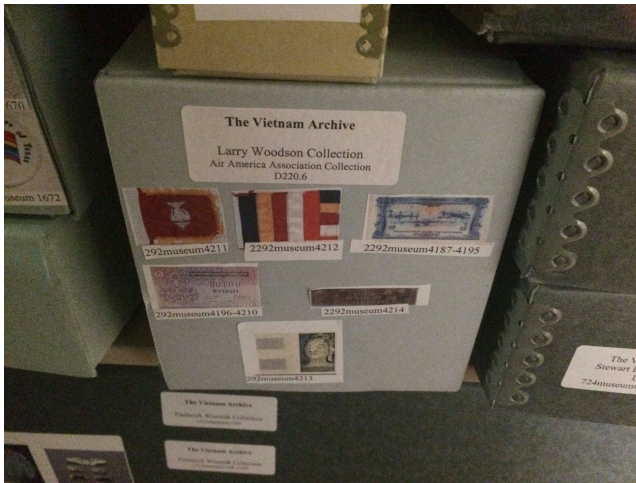


Figure 15 (left): Photo of a box of “objects” in the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University (November 15, 2015).

Figure 16 (right): Archival Specialist, Kevin Sailsbury showing me how the military would use flashlights, held at an angle to read the topography of these maps. The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University (November 15, 2015).

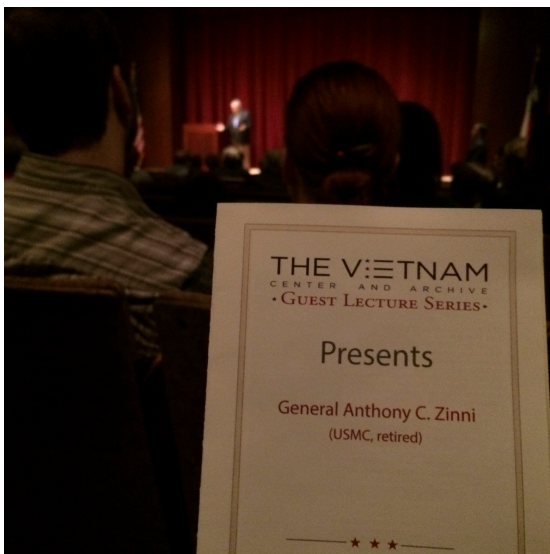


Figure 17 (left): General Anthony C. Zinni at Texas Tech University (November 15, 2015).

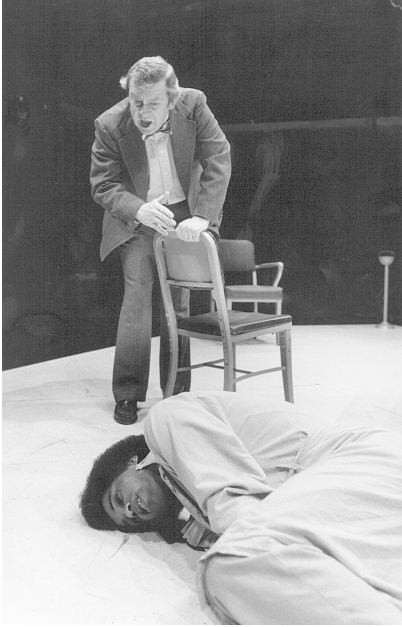
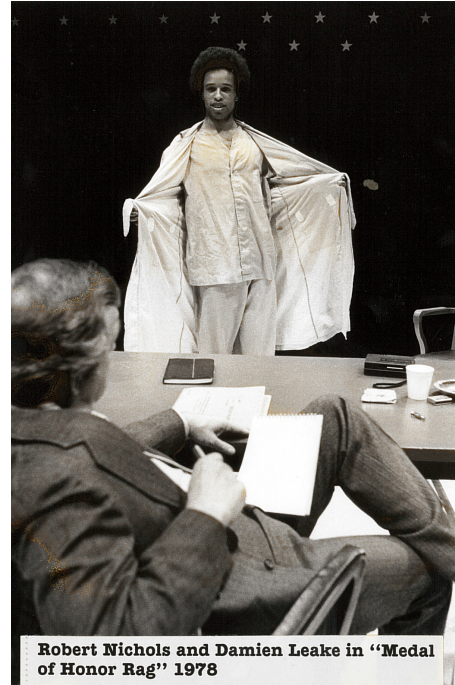


Figure 18 (left): *Medal of Honor Rag* by Tom Cole. Photo used with permission from the Pittsburgh Public Theater (February 1978).



Robert Nichols and Damien Leake in “Medal of Honor Rag” 1978



Figure 20 (above): *Medal of Honor Rag* by Tom Cole. Photo used with permission from St. Louis Actors’ Studio (January 2009).



Figure 21 (above): Staged reading of Emily Mann's *Still Life* at the University of Kansas (February 2015).

Figure 22 (right): Production photo for *Tracers* at Steppenwolf Theatre. Photo used with permission from Steppenwolf Theatre Company (1984).

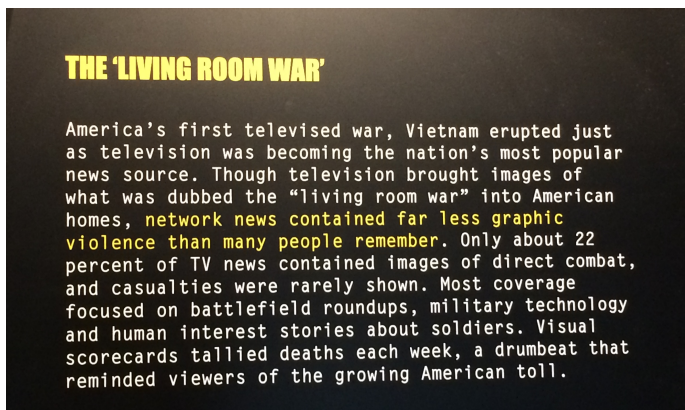


Figure 23 (left): Display at the Newseum as part of the "Reporting Vietnam" Exhibit in Washington, D.C. (July 2015).



Figure 24 (left): The original cast of *Tracers*. From left to right, bottom row: Harry Stephens, Vincent Caristi, John DiFusco; top row: Merlin Marston, Rick Gallavan, Richard Chaves, and Eric E. Emerson. Note from DiFusco, "We're holding copies of the LADCC Award for Ensemble Performance. What a time it was!"

Dramaturgical Packets: Table of Contents

In order to draw a comparisons between my dramaturgical work in this project and my professional dramaturgical work I have provided a few examples of previous “table of contents” for productions for which I served as dramaturg.

The Ghosts of Lote Bravo by Hilary Bettis at the Unicorn Theatre (Spring 2016)

Playwright: Hilary Bettis
La Santa Muerte
Ghosts and Monsters and Drugs
Police
NAFTA and Maquiladoras
Women Respond to Maquiladora Life (and Death)
Women in Juarez: Femicide
Bull Fighting

The Oldest Boy by Sarah Ruhl at the Unicorn Theatre (Fall 2015)

Playwright and Inspiration: Sarah Ruhl
Play: *The Oldest Boy*
Reviews: Lincoln Center Theatre Production
Tibet: Culture and Language
India: Dharmasala
Tibetan Buddhism
China’s Invasion of Tibet
Bunraku Puppetry
Ceremonies
From the Script: Terms and Images

Tribes by Nina Raine at the Unicorn Theatre (Spring 2015)

Playwright and Inspiration: Nina Raine
Play: *Tribes*
Reviews: Past Productions
American Sign Language Alphabet
Articles and Links: Deaf Community
Language and Lacan
Music References
From the Script: Terms and Images